

WELCOME 22 July 2018 – 9 Pentecost '18 B

Good morning! Welcome to worship today! It is great to have you all here this morning. Please stay with us for morning tea...you know that's going to be awesome.

You're familiar w/ these? Each is an early warning that something is about to go wrong w/ your car. There are others that you either see regularly or have seen. Every one of those signals an impending danger, a potential misfortune, a looming misadventure.

But sometimes the unforeseen happens. Sometimes you don't see it coming and you're in a mess before you know it. Sometimes it's just an accident but the pain or hurt is every bit as real & lasting as if it was done intentionally.

As God's people began to settle the land God had given them they were given this instruction: *The Lord said to Joshua, Now tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed Moses...*"

God told them to set aside cities of refuge...places where (when things went horribly wrong) there was a place & time to quietly peacefully seek justice & right-ness in our dealings with others....places where wrongs would be redressed fairly & with a view toward how our behaviours have a communal impact...The cities of refuge were advance warning that life would not always go well, relationships not always be trouble-free...but in those moments God would be active to restore his shalom, peace, right-ness if only his people would turn to him and not seek their own way.

You too can experience God's rest/refuge – His shalom because Christ has given it to us freely by his life/death/resurrection. You too can live in the refuge & rest of God's love now...AND when life's circumstances get rough or rocky or broken. Christ is our refuge where the doors are never closed, the road always clear, and sanctuary is always available for those seeking relief, rest, peace...where all things are being made right forever.

We'll explore & experience that today...

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Gracious God, in love You open wide the doors and welcome us into Your presence —saints and sinners all. You spread a table before us, filled with the richest fare— a feast of love and mercy for the body and soul. --- We come with joy to meet You here, to eat and drink at Your table, to taste and see Your goodness, to celebrate Your grace and mercy in our lives. --- May Your Spirit inspire our praise and thanksgiving, our prayers and petitions, our lives beyond this moment as we live and worship in Your presence. In the name of Jesus Christ, our host and Lord, Amen.

9 PENTECOST '18 B – COURAGEOUS FAITH: REST BEFORE YOU ARE WEARY

JOSHUA 20:1-9

FAITH CHAT:

1. Share a time when something you planned went “pear-shaped.” – just wrong
2. When you think of “rest” what do you think?

The “Chicago Way”...most of us 1st heard of it when Sean Connery explained it to Kevin Costner in the movie *The Untouchables* (grizzled patrol Sgt to the young FBI agent) “If they pull a knife you pull a gun. If they put one of yours in the hospital you put one of theirs in the morgue.” That’s the Chicago Way The previous US president invoked it against his political opponents telling his supporters, “punch back twice as hard.”

It might surprise former presidents/movie makers, but the Chicago Way is as old as humanity. Gen 4:22-23 records this boast: “One day Lamech said to his wives, ‘Adah & Zillah, hear my voice; listen to me, you wives of mine: I have killed a man who attacked me, a young man who wounded me. If someone who kills Cain is punished seven times, then the one who kills me will be punished seventy-seven times!’” Makes “punch back 2x as hard” seem tame. Truth is...we’re familiar with the “law of the jungle” “survival of the fittest” “lex talionis”...Latin for law of the claw...you hit me I hit back...cut me off in traffic I’ll beat you up at the next traffic light...blood feuds...generational hatred...tribal warfare...we know

Our modern sensitivities are perhaps offended by the Mosaic command, “...a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot, a burn for a burn, a wound for a wound, a bruise for a bruise.” We hear this derided...if we do this we all end up blind & toothless...But this was in fact a LIMITATION on what was common in the ancient world...unrelenting revenge/blood feuds/Chicago Way. That verse in Ex 21 reads in full: “**The punishment must match the injury: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth...**” etc...It put a stop to Lamech’s “kill you for wounding me” mindset. But there was the understanding...a life for a life. Those who took human life forfeited theirs. Life was God’s to give. God’s to end. To kill another meant you were acting as if you were God & idolatry of that magnitude would be punished in equal magnitude. Those who took human life forfeited theirs.

But sometimes the unforeseen happens. Sometimes you don’t see it coming & you’re in a mess before you know it. Sometimes it’s just an accident but the pain or hurt is every bit as real & lasting as if it was done intentionally. But if the law says, “life for life,” & that responsibility for payback falls to the family of the one killed & there are no courts/appeals processes/legal aid for the poor...How do you avoid the pitfall of the myth of retribution masquerading as justice? unending spiral of vengeance?

Now tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed Moses. Anyone who kills another person accidentally & unintentionally can run to one of these cities; they will be places of refuge from relatives seeking revenge for the person who was killed.

When the unthinkable happens...When your best plans absolutely collapse...When you are on the hook for someone else’s life...someone else’s loss...grief...pain... When “sorry” is not enough...God understands the complexities of the human heart & broken sinful human life here on earth. Horrible things happen & not every death is premeditated murder. The OT legal code makes that distinction like no other ... So...God told them to set aside cities of refuge...places where (when things went horribly wrong) there was a place & time to quietly peacefully seek justice & right-ness in our dealings with others...You//God knows – violent revenge may be viscerally satisfying, but it redeems nothing – restores nothing – resolves nothing. God’s intent is always to redeem & restore & recreate justice & peace (shalom = absolute harmony & right-ness)

I find it striking: These cities were some of the 1st established in their new homeland. Before they were fully at home they were reminded that things would not always go well...life would not always operate according to plan...in their broken world among their broken lives there would be more brokenness but in those moments God would be active to restore his shalom, peace, justice, & right-ness if only his people would turn to him & not seek their own way. Before troubles came...God established his grace-filled way through...Don’t ever think OT has no grace...

About those cities...underlying everything God’s people are called to do & be is this simple promise: *Deut. 33:27 - The eternal God is your refuge, & his everlasting arms are under you.* Subsequent generations of God’s people would reclaim that promise: *For you are my hiding place; you protect me from trouble. You surround me with songs of victory. – Ps 32:7 & The name of the Lord is a strong fortress; the godly run to him & are safe. - Pr 18:10* They were to reflect in their dealings with each other their reliance on the Father for all things. Their trust in God’s protection & provision & justice & rule over all things was to be lived in their daily relationships...even those relationships tainted, damaged, broken beyond human repair. Especially when the unthinkable happened...when best made plans collapsed...when they were on the hook for someone else’s life...someone else’s loss...grief...pain... When “sorry” was not enough...

There were 6 cities of refuge...3 west of the Jordan River & 3 to the east & located N-S such that no person seeking refuge was ever more than a ½-day's journey from safety.

These cities were always accessible. Their gates were never locked & the roads leading to them were cleared & rebuilt every year such that no obstacle would keep someone fleeing for their life from finding at least temporary shelter. There were signposts pointing the way to safety. If you killed someone & you knew it was an accident but the bereaved family had a legal responsibility to exact justice you would run as fast as possible to one of those cities to plead your case before that city's elders. It was the closest thing to a fair trial you would ever have. If the elders decided in your favour you were permitted to live in the city of refuge. The cities were stocked with provisions & shelter so that you could re-establish some sort of life in this your new community. It was not only a place of guaranteed legal protection...But material provision...& always accessible.

Secondly...the cities of refuge were open to all – Jew AND Gentile – no distinction was made in the pursuit of justice & shelter. The same justice, the same protection & provision were free to all. God in establishing these cities of refuge set the wheels in motion for what would ultimately be due process of law...equal standing before the law...Our present legal system finds its roots in this Biblical teaching that declares a person is innocent until proven guilty. Until everything was investigated by the elders & a just decision handed down in a full hearing before the entire community, the accused enjoyed the security of presumed innocence & protection from hasty ill-informed retribution...always accessible & open to all...sounds great!

There was only one limitation: Your life depended on staying put...where you were assured of safe-keeping. Outside the city of refuge you were fair game for blood justice according to the law. Inside the city of refuge...no one could touch you. Only the death of the high priest granted absolute pardon. The accused was only allowed to return home when the serving high priest died. The death of the high priest wiped the slate clean...His death begets new life.

Look closely at those 3...Always accessible. Open to All. The death of the high priest grants absolute pardon. I hope somebody right about now is thinking; "Wow! That's just like Jesus!" Yes it is. A few years back I read a fabulous book titled, *Jesus on Every Page*. It's point is simple: *The Lord is gracious & merciful, slow to anger & abounding in steadfast love* is not just Ps 145:8...Neither is it only a post-Easter confession. God the Father reveals himself in love & grace throughout the pages of Scripture; & all along the way from Genesis to Revelation leaves signposts pointing to the ultimate grace mercy & steadfast love that we see in Jesus the Son crucified/risen/ruling over all things.

Think this though with me...The mere existence of cities of refuge presume there are people guilty & under judgment of death. That these cities are established before the land is fully settled assumes the truth of *Rom 5:12 - When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.* All are guilty. All are facing death. All face judgment.

But when God our Savior revealed his kindness & love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth & new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of his grace he made us right in his sight & gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life. – Titus 3:4-7 That door is never closed, the road is always open because of Christ's death/rez. *Eph 2:4-5 - But God is so rich in mercy, & he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!)* That refuge/rescue is always accessible...if you need it now...it's here

But even more... ...that relief from punishment is open to all. *If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord & believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, & it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced." Jew & Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* – *Rom 10:9-13* ...always accessible - open to all

Jesus is the kind of high priest we need because he is holy & blameless, unstained by sin. He has been set apart from sinners & has been given the highest place of honor in heaven. Unlike those other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices every day. They did this for their own sins first & then for the sins of the people. But Jesus did this once for all when he offered himself as the sacrifice for the people's sins. – Heb 7:26-27 Only the death of the high priest granted absolute pardon. Only the death of the high priest wiped the slate clean...His death begets new life.

So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, & we will find grace to help us when we need it most. – Heb 4:14-16

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Let's pray: Heavenly Father you alone are our refuge and strength. You alone defend us from every evil attack. You sent your Son Jesus to rescue and redeem us and open the way so we could be drawn into your presence forever. Bring your peace to our hearts, your joy to our lives, and your rest to our souls. Release us into your world to live such that all experience your saving love through us. We pray through Jesus Christ our great High Priest...Amen.