

The Flesh Wants to Be Strong

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Proper 9[a])

July 9, 2017

MATTHEW 11:25-30

²⁵ At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

The flesh wants to be strong.

But Jesus wants to speak to people who are weak—weak and tired and lowly and heavily burdened.

If you are not one of those, Jesus doesn't have much to say.

Yet, the flesh wants to be strong. And to be strong means, you don't receive things as gifts, but you earn them. You don't come to the Lord in weakness and lowliness, hoping for a word of mercy, but you come with your accomplishments, with what you've built up, expecting a reward. To be strong means you don't stand before the Lord as one pressed down under burden, but as one standing ramrod straight, able to withstand any assault.

Yet, the Lord speaks to those who are weak.

Has there ever been a more self-evidently weak, lowly, and heavily-burdened people than the people of Israel when the Lord had delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

As a people enslaved, they had been burdened with heavy labor and poverty, they were too lowly to deliver themselves from the false gods and false worship imposed by the Pharaoh—the Pharaoh even determined whether or not their children could live—and they were too weak to deliver themselves from any of it.

As the Lord took them out of Egypt and was dragging them across the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, has there ever been a people more obviously weak and lowly than these Israelites? Has anyone ever been in a better position to realize with full knowledge that the Lord is your deliverer, not you, yourself; that your enemies are put to death by the Lord, not by your own strength or effort; that you receive all good things as gift from the Lord, you don't make them up or earn them or choose them on your own—has anyone ever been in a better position to know that the sinner lives by grace alone, than these Israelites being taken care of by the Lord out in the wilderness?

Yet, the flesh wants to be strong.

The God who brought them out of slavery, who gave them his Name and promised to always be with them according to that Name, who forgave their sins and made them holy, that God left them standing before him as those who receive gifts.

And to be only receiving gifts is to be not strong.

They wanted to be strong. So they collected all the earrings of gold, all the rings from their hands, all the jewelry, and with this great collection of gold, they had Aaron make for them a gold bull. The bull was the animal of the god Baal, who was the god of thunder and sky. They would fashion this god with their own hands, for when you make your own god, that god is under your control, and you are strong.

Aaron made the gold bull, it was magnificent, and the people looked at it and said to themselves, "*This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!*" [Exodus 32:4]

And Israel was pleased. *Tomorrow we will have a feast to this god*, they said. And they were happy; they now stood before a god they themselves made; they were strong.

Then the Lord looked down and saw what they had made. The true Lord, the living God, the one who had actually delivered this people out of Egypt, who had created the Earth, including all the gold, the God who was the creator of all life and of the sky and the thunder, he who created all things, he looked down at this magnificent bull the Israelites had made, and said, "a golden calf."

A little golden calf. The Lord who sits in the heavens laughs and holds them in derision. [Psalm 2]

A little calf made of gold. How laughable a bull looks to the Holy God when sinners try to make themselves appear strong. So he sent Moses down from the mountain, into the middle of the Israelites, and had Moses grind the ridiculous golden calf to powder and scatter the powder on the water, and made the Israelites drink the water.

And where was their strength now?

They now stand before the face of God as nothing but sinners; as nothing but those who labor in their guilt, heavily burdened with shame; as those made lowly by the Law and who now know themselves as being too weak to justify themselves.

They stand before Holy God in their sin. In this weakness, they finally find their true Lord. Not a lord they created with their own hands, a god fashioned from earrings, but the true Lord, the Lord of life, the Lord who says to the sinner,

²⁸"Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

This is the Lord of grace. The Lord who speaks forgiveness and makes himself known in his mercy. This is the Lord who sees the sinner trying to be strong, and in his lovingkindness says, *Be done with the gods you have built with your own hands and your own minds; leave behind those works of yours in which you place your confidence; be done with any celebration of your own efforts, strength, or decisions; leave the works of your flesh behind, and come unto me. Hear my word of forgiveness, and*

know that I have carried the burden of your sin. Come unto me, and rejoice in my Name given you in your Baptism, and know that my gentleness overcomes your fear of sin, death, and the devil. Come unto me, where I give myself to you in my Own Body and Blood to make you holy, and you will find rest for your souls.

Jesus reveals himself to us. He gives himself to us and makes us his Own. It is completely his work and gift, so that we are given to finally realize that there is no better place to be than to be a sinner standing before God in lowliness and weakness, and to know that all things come to us from God only as gift.

Our flesh? Our sinful flesh will keep on exerting itself. Will keep on trying to push the gift of faith out of the way, will keep on daily trying to fulfill the law and gain its own justification. The sinful flesh wants to be strong. But the sinful flesh cannot be other than it is, other than sinful. So it will keep on acting as if it can keep the Law, keep on acting as if it is strong. Romans 7:19:

¹⁸ For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but *how* to perform what is good I do not find. ¹⁹ For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. ²⁰ Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

Is there any delivery from this sinful flesh, from this desire to be strong before God?

This sinful flesh that we work so hard on, to make it better, to improve it, this is a golden calf. We build it up with our own efforts, we celebrate what we think we are accomplishing, we justify ourselves with our own obedience by our works of the flesh, until finally the burden of the Law overcomes even us, and then we can say along with Paul,

²⁴ O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

[Romans 7:24]

We *are* delivered. Daily, and faithfully, even as our brothers and sisters the Israelites—we are delivered from our body of death and our dependence on our own works of the flesh, and the delivery is when Jesus comes to us in his Word, and hearing his Word, we say along with Paul, *I thank God through Jesus*

Christ my Lord.

He is our righteousness before God. He is our delivery from our false gods, from sin, death, and the devil. He is the One handing over to us every good gift from the Father, revealing the Father to us. He is the One gently forgiving our sin, kindly joining us together as brothers and sisters in his body, the Church. He is the One always with the voice of invitation,

²⁸ Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.