

11TH SUNDAY (A) JUNE 15, 2008
EXODUS 19:2-6A ROMANS 5:6-11
MATTHEW 9:36-10:8
GOD HELP US!



'God helps those who help themselves,' as the old saying goes. This is supposed to pump us into action when we don't want to, nor feel like doing something or anything! Here is this one for job-seekers, 'Get those resumes out, a hundred of them if you have to. Career success doesn't grow on trees. God helps those who help themselves. That's my motto.' These aren't bad sayings at all and they can be helpful. It is true that we should not sit around and feel entitled to life's joys and opportunities, thinking that what we want will fall out of the sky on us even if we are slackers or cowardly.

There is a saying, however, which is more deeply rooted in the Bible that we need to remember in tough times: *"While we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly."* This saying is from St. Paul's letter to the Church at Rome. Think about it for a moment: *"While we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly."* What does it mean for us?

Notice – St. Paul says, *"While we were still helpless..."* He means you and me as well as the people he addressed in his time. There are no self-made people, who can depend only on themselves, no matter how hard they try to believe it. There is a world of difference between being stewards of our gifts and being creators and owners of them. We are stewards, not owners.

Then, too, no one could ever discover God by persistent search, or fathom the mysteries of God by wisdom and education, or earn God's favor by a life of perfect morals or heroic endeavor. No, according to Holy Scripture, God crossed and continues to cross the gap between us humans and God, not by meeting us *half-way*. He covers the whole distance. From the act of creation, to the giving of the Laws and Commandments of the Bible, to the ultimate stretch towards us in Jesus Christ himself, God has been covering all the whole distance between humanity and divinity. And, this is important to remember, it is all God's initiative, not ours. Our salvation is totally the unmerited gift from God. It is a gift that cost God dearly. So God did what only God could do, and only God would do. He gave us the gift of "help for the helpless." When

we were helpless, God, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, died for the ungodly. One thing we can be sure we will not hear in heaven – people bragging that they picked themselves up by the bootstraps to get there. Some sayings, like that one “pick yourself up by your bootstraps,” can be of value, but it certainly not Gospel unless one realizes that one wants to pick him/herself up by the bootstraps by giving one’s hand and heart to a Lord stretching down from the cross to help.

What all this means is that we have to be ‘poor in spirit,’ dependent upon God and help ourselves realizing that it is not we who love God first, but that God has loved us first.

God’s *“help for the helpless”* is oriented toward us tenderly, choosing us to be in relationship with Him. Did you notice this theme in the readings today? God told Moses to teach the Israelites that their preservation as a nation was a sign of God’s tender nurture, like the eagle teaching her young to fly by carrying them on her wing until they are able to get the idea and skill of flying. Take her away, with those patient and persistent flying lessons, and we would be left with a generation of eagles that were created to soar just walking around awkwardly with unused, now useless, wings.

Look, too, in the Gospel how Jesus shows compassion to the crowds who seek him out. The word Matthew uses to describe Jesus’ compassion is a word picture that suggests that he felt their burdens and helplessness in his very abdomen (the Greek word is also used of the stomach or bowels). Sometimes we hear of husbands feeling sympathy pains for a wife’s labor pains, or a worried parent being so concerned for a child that they will feel queasy in the stomach.

All through his life, Jesus made every effort to show us all just how much he loves us, not just loved us then, and with a greater love than we will ever be able to understand, much less come close to deserving, he offered his life, and a final word that sets us free. It is a gift that cannot be earned nor even repaid, only received with overwhelmed and grateful hearts. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what to do.” Jesus said at the last that reconciliation with God is the only lasting help for the helpless. What amazing grace! It is a great gift, an act of faith, for us to cry out: God help us!

I would like to end this morning with this prayer, a response by which we might truly respond to all that God has given us, the helpless, in his Son, Jesus Christ:

I choose to breathe the breath of Christ

that makes all life holy.
I choose the live the flesh of Christ
that outlasts sin's corrosion and decay.
I choose the blood of Christ
along my veins and in my heart
that dizzies me with joy.
I choose the living water flowing from his side
to wash my own self and the word itself.
I choose the awful agony of Christ
to charge my senseless sorrow with meaning
and to make my pain pregnant with power.
I choose you, good Lord; count me along the victories
that you have won in bitter woundedness.
Never number me among those alien to you.
Make me safe from all that seeks to destroy me.
Summon me to come to you.
Stand me solid among angels and saints
chanting yes to all you have done,
exulting in all you mean to do forever and ever.
Then for this time, Father of all,
Keep me, from the core of myself,
choosing Christ in the world.
Amen.*

*Hearts On Fire: *Praying with the Jesuits* ed. Michael Harter, SJ. 1993 p8.
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