

1 Kings 3:5-12; Psalm 119:129-136; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

“The Spirit helps us”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

You might wonder what Paul is getting at when he writes, “*If God is for us, who is against us?*” Human beings are masters of judging and condemning one another upon appearances and perceptions. We may tell someone they won’t be going to heaven, or we may, silently in our hearts, condemn another to a furnace of fire. In contrast, Paul’s words, “*If God is for us, who is against us?*” remind us that God judges with love, grace, and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. God is for all of us. Grace and love are God’s, because God first loves us.

Writing about grace and love are significant because Paul knew firsthand the grace and love of Jesus Christ. Though Paul had persecuted Christ and the church, condemning people because of their beliefs, God did not give up on Paul. Like the parable in today’s gospel, the risen Christ cast a net of grace over Paul, transforming him and setting him upon a new course in life. Paul’s words, “*If God is for us, who is against us?*” remind us that God doesn’t give up on anyone.

Very often however, we can give up without even noticing. In addition to condemning others, we also know what it means to condemn ourselves. Very often we carry heavy baggage: we can feel sorrow for things we may have done, we can be bitter with regret for lost opportunities, we can burn inside with unresolved anger, and we can find it difficult to forgive others. We need to hear words of grace reminding us that nothing can separate us from God’s love, neither the judgment of others, or our own judgment of ourselves. God doesn’t give up on anyone.

Like Paul, the Holy Spirit is always seeking to transform us, interceding for us “with sighs too deep for words.” It is our baggage can become the transformative yeast of God’s grace growing within us.

When I was a young person, I frequently encountered people carrying heavy burdens at the parsonage door of the church where my father was pastor in Chicago. Among the endless stream of people was a man who went by a street name, whom I will call “Mr. D.” This man often knocked on the door of the parsonage full of street swagger, drunk or high, and at times, even belligerent. One day, I answered the door and was met by Mr. D. who told me that he was angry with God, saying, “I’ve tried all this religion stuff and God never helps me.” That day, Mr. D. became belligerent, threatening me with a knife if I would not give him money. Sadly, I closed

the door on him. Two days later, I was working down on Chicago's Gold Coast on North Dearborn Parkway far from home at a summer job as a building engineer. It was a sunny morning and I was watering the flowers and lawn, and looking up, saw Mr. D. in the distance walking toward me. He didn't, of course, recognize me, asked me for a drink of water, and walked south toward Rush Street and the bars and taverns.

It was many years before I saw him again. I was a young pastor and my wife and I were in the States visiting churches that sponsored us as missionaries. One day, I happened to be at my parents' home and the parsonage doorbell rang and I was met by Mr. D. It had been over 10, perhaps 15 years, since I had last seen him. He was clean shaven, with short hair, and wearing clean clothing. He politely asked if my father was home, saying that he had a job and wanted to thank my father, the pastor who had always tried to help him. I told him that my father was not home, and he asked if we could talk. When I addressed him by his street name, he asked me not to call him by that name anymore, saying that his name was "James."

So, we sat on the front steps of the church, and he wept as he told me of his journey to and release from the maximum-security prison at Joliet. Choking on tears he told me how God's love had helped him, and how he felt forgiven for all he had done. The man upon whom I had closed the parsonage door over a decade earlier, had returned seeking grace from a place that was a sign of God's kingdom to him.

I tell you this story because God is never finished with any of us. No matter what we have done in our lives, no matter the baggage we carry, the kingdom of heaven grows like a mustard seed inside each of us. The kingdom is like yeast transforming lifeless flour into life-giving bread, transforming us with glimpses of the kingdom of heaven alive inside of us.

Like the "James" in the story, each of us comes to this church because, like a tree growing from a mustard seed offering refuge and sanctuary, we also find the grace and peace of sanctuary in this place. In Jesus' parable, the kingdom of heaven is likened to a net that is cast upon this world catching both the good and the bad, the righteous and the evil. Jesus casts this net upon us over and over rescuing us and offering us grace. We may be at a life stage when we realize the value of this grace, or we may yet be carrying burdens that blind us to God's grace.

Paul tells us that "*The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.*" There may be times when we cannot pray for all of our anger, when we cannot pray for all of our remorse and regret, when we

cannot pray for all of our grief and sorrow. Very frequently, we can be angrier with God than we are with others or even with ourselves.

Wherever you are on your human journey, the Spirit helps you in your weakness. The Spirit helped Paul, and the Spirit helped “James.” That day sitting on the church steps, the Spirit also helped me see that transformation of the human heart is real, even to those whom we may have condemned, saying, “They will never change” *If God is for us, who is against us?* are words meaning that God doesn’t give up on anyone.

Jesus’ parable about the pearl is profound because, unlike gold, silver or diamonds, pearls grow inside a living creature. Just as pearls grow by surrounding and transforming an irritant or parasite that has invaded the oyster, God’s grace grows in you always seeking to transform your adversity and burdens into the treasure of grace hidden inside of you. The Spirit helps us in our weakness, transforming our past into the present of God’s kingdom of grace dwelling inside of us.

By the world’s standards, God’s kingdom looks small and insignificant. Yet Jesus’ parables about the kingdom describe a place of sanctuary and refuge, a place of transformation, a place of hidden value, and a place of unconditional welcome and inclusion.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness so that transformed, we might help others rather than condemning them. The Spirit helps us pray as we ought, suffering with us so that transformed, we might suffer with others.

*If God is for us, who is against us?* God never gives up on you. Turn to him daily in prayer. The Spirit will pray with you, and the Spirit will heal you.

Ask yourself, “If God is for me, how will I be for others?”

Amen.