

November 22, 2009

Last Sunday of the Church Year

“Endure the Heat Until God’s Glorious October”

Jude 20-25

“These people got to be nuts to live here!” That is what my inner Yankee thinks in about late-September when the temperature and humidity around here are both still in the 90s and have been there since May. Back home in Chicago we get hot, humid weather like here but it doesn’t arrive until late June and it varies in intensity and goes away by September. Here it’s like some cosmic hot, wet towel gets dropped on the region in spring and just sits there roasting for six straight months.

But then October arrives and it’s wonderful...even though October didn’t get here until November this year. The days are pleasant, the nights are cool. You no longer get sticky from exerting yourself by doing things like breathing. People in south Louisiana endure the summer heat knowing that relief is coming; though it seems far off at times, the magnificent season of autumn will arrive and we’ll be able to take long walks, drive with our windows down and enjoy the great outdoors in many wonderful ways.

Our Christian walk is somewhat similar to this. Being a Christian isn’t easy. The subject of Christian persecution comes up a lot in the lectionary as we approach today—the last Sunday of the church year—and our Bible readings focus on the end times and the last day. So we think of persecution and we remember the martyrs of the early church who gave their lives for the faith. We remember men like Martin Luther who risked their lives to profess true Christian doctrine.

For us it’s different but the same. Nobody is out to kill us for being Christian. Nobody is going to throw us in prison for being Lutheran. But we do live in the midst of a culture that increasingly tries to draw us away from the faith toward false teachings. We live in the midst of not only temptation, but deception. We live in an age that more and more tries to tell us that sin is not sin, that God is nothing more than a moral concept and above all that Jesus is not the way and the truth and the life.

But we know the way, the truth and the life. We know that God not only exists, but He loves His creation and sent His only Son Jesus Christ to pay the blood price to purchase humanity back into His kingdom. We know God’s law is clear and we know we should strive to live out His will and His love in our lives. But all of this worldly pressure to do otherwise is on us like south Louisiana’s midsummer heat and humidity. Our media, our politics, even our family and friends are always pushing us to believe messages of the world that seek to make sin acceptable to us.

The short letter of Jude is a warning about all of this. Jude’s whole letter is only 25 verses long. He is succinct and straight to the point. He warns of people who have crept into the church “*who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.*” He says that these people “*relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones.*”

Joel isn’t speaking of the outright persecution against the church. Nobody is standing up and saying, “Forget Jesus Christ or die.” He is talking about a much more subtle persecution; the encouraging and acceptance of false teachings that lure people out of the way, the truth and the life.

It's kind of like air conditioning. The heat of our summer is brutal. Life is easier indoors. So we get out of the heat. Some people not only get out of the heat, but they cover up their windows to keep the light and the heat that comes from it out. People develop habits and lifestyles that are all about staying inside the air conditioning and avoiding the heat and the light that goes with it.

We have got the same thing going on within and outside of the church today. One of the most obvious is the acceptance of homosexuality of laity and clergy in various mainstream Christian denominations. The Bible is very, very clear such behavior is sinful. But the teaching of tolerance and diversity has become that a tolerance of diverse sins is a virtue.

And we say "Tsk. Tsk." How awful. But look in our own backyard. Abstinence until marriage; how many of us might term that as "quaint but just not realistic." How many of us look at couples living together outside of marriage as just a "lifestyle choice" that really isn't all that bad as long as they really love each other? Although the Lord's Word is clear, "God hates divorce," how many of us look at our own divorce and think, "It was the right thing to do. It's not really something I really need to repent of and plead for God's forgiveness"? Some of us abuse drugs or alcohol or prescription medications and try to convince ourselves that it's OK because it is our body to do with as we please, not the temple and gift that God has given us. We let in all sorts of teachings that paint sin and disobedience as "not so sinful."

Jesus tells us to forgive without ceasing; to forgive all wrongs. How many of us think it's OK to hold onto hatred and resentment against somebody because "What they did was just that bad," or because "I'm right and they're wrong."? How many of us are called on to sacrifice in order to help somebody else but we don't or we do so resentfully because "I work hard for my money and I deserve it. Let them get their own!"?

All of these and more are ways that Christian people subtly replace the clear will of God with worldly beliefs. Doing so may make life seem easier and more comfortable for us. But what these beliefs do is make us more comfortable in our sin. It is like we have stepped into the air conditioning—and artificial man-made comfort—and covered all the windows. It may make us feel OK for a while, but we've cut ourselves off from the reality of how things really are in the world. And if we deny God's truths, God's law, long enough and hard enough, how long can it be before we are denying His Gospel truth as well. How long before we are denying our Master and Lord Jesus Christ.

What Jude urges us to do in the closing of his letter that we have before us today is to endure the heat, because a glorious October is on its way. We are to look at the world in light of God's Word, His promise of forgiveness and salvation in Christ Jesus. We are to work to continually be built up in our faith in the face of all the pressure the sinful world and our own sinful selves put on us. We are to beware of seeking the false comfort of teachings and beliefs that make sin, disobedience and rebellion against God acceptable and even right in the eyes of men.

Enduring the heat is all about love. Loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and loving your neighbor as yourself. It's not easy. At times it makes us sweat. At times it makes us uncomfortable. At times its opposition to the world and its call for sacrifice even come close to being unbearable.

Remember, we stand in this heat awaiting the arrival of He who endured much worse for us; we await the return of Christ Jesus. We endure in love because He first loved us with all His heart, soul, mind and strength unto death. We don't hide ourselves in earthly sinful comfort, but

boldly live repentant lives in the light of His love and forgiveness; in the heat of a fallen world awaiting a glorious new season to arrive.

*But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.*

*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.*