

PENTECOST: A TIME TO BE FILLED WITH GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
September 4, 2011

Exodus 12:1-14 or Ezekiel 33:7-11
Psalm 149 or 119:33-40
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

Teach Us, Lord, the Words of Life

The month of September brings with it thoughts and activities related to returning to school and a resumption of academic studies. Among many faith traditions, weekly church school activities likewise are resuming following a summer hiatus. As a young student and later as a teacher in my adult years, I fondly remember “Rally Days” and the sense of anticipation associated with the start of a new “church year” – learning new Bible stories and planning for a new curriculum.

As Christians, we are lifelong disciples of Jesus, our Lord and Teacher. As such, we are perpetual students – never outgrowing our need to learn and grow in faith. The pericopes for this week offer some valuable teachings for our Christian walk.

Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the Bible, is a wisdom psalm in praise of God’s Law or teaching. Verses 33-40 are a prayer for understanding and God’s guidance in our faith journey. “Teach me, LORD, the meaning of your laws, and I will obey them at all times” (119:33, *GNT*). The psalmist acknowledges that obedience to God’s commandments is the source of true happiness (verse 35) and abundant life (verse 40).

From the Old Testament reading in Ezekiel, we learn of God’s desire that all turn from evil in order to live (33:11), and we are told of our responsibility to warn the wicked to change their ways (33:8, 9). This same exhortation is echoed in the Letter from James: “...whoever turns a sinner back from the wrong way will save that sinner’s soul from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins” (5:20, *GNT*).

The responsibility of a Christian to reprove a wrongdoer is also at the core of this week’s Gospel text from Matthew. Jesus’ teaching is often regarded as a blueprint for conflict resolution, and his words admonish us to lead a wrongdoer to the path of repentance. Yet, Jesus does not stop there. We are told, if our various efforts prove futile, to treat such persons as Gentiles (pagans) or tax collectors (18:17) – the very kind of persons to whom Jesus himself reached out.

Contrary to what we may think, such persons are not to be treated as objects of exclusion but rather as those to whom graciousness and the kingdom of God are to be extended.

The text represents a call to mission. As the preceding verses (10-14) in Matthew 18 point out, we are to follow the shepherd's example and seek out and minister to those who are lost. The text further exhorts us to pursue a ministry of reconciliation and to experience the power of God when God's people live together in unity. Jesus said, "where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them" (18:20, *GNT*).

The words from Psalm 119 continue to remind us of our need to be obedient to God's Law. And the apostle Paul, in this week's epistle to the Romans, teaches us that the whole Law is summed up in the command to love our neighbors (13:9). Love of neighbor implies no wrongdoing on our part. Loving and serving others in true Christian fashion is outlined by Paul in Romans 12:9-21 (last week's text).

Yes, the month of September provides us with an opportunity to "jump start" and renew our growth in faith. As the writer of 2 Peter reminds us: "...do your best to add goodness to your faith; to your goodness add knowledge; to your knowledge add self-control; to your self-control add endurance; to your endurance add godliness; to your godliness add Christian affection; and to your Christian affection add love" (1:6, 7, *GNT*). Words to live by, for sure! Thank you, Lord, for your wonderful teachings; continue to teach me and "fill my mind with your wisdom" (Psalm 51:6b, *GNT*).

This week's Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel who, until retirement, served on the staff of American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship. Barbara continues as a consultant to ABS.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Portugal – with thanks to God that the Interconfessional Bible has been well received, and that the Society has been able to continue Bible work despite great restrictions caused by a very difficult economic situation; and with prayers for success in producing a Study Bible based on the Interconfessional Bible; also pray for success in recording the New Testament in audio, for improvement in Internet-based communications, and for the development of a more systematic program of Bible Weeks as the Society seeks to continue serving all churches; **Spain** – with thanks to God for Bible work in this country; and with prayers for God's guidance in the Society's endeavors; **Italy** – with thanks to God for Bible work in this country; and with prayers for God's guidance in the Society's endeavors.

Activity Corner: "Love Your Neighbor" Booklet

Supplies needed: Bible; construction paper (8-1/2" x 11"); writing paper (8-1/2" x 11"); pens/pencils; 3-hole puncher; brass fasteners; glue or paste; scissors; old magazines; crayons/markers for younger children.

Read together Psalm 119:33-40 and Exodus 20:1-17 and discuss what it means to be obedient to God's commandments. Then read Luke 10:25-37 (The Parable of the Good Samaritan) and discuss how loving one's neighbor fulfills the Law. Distribute two sheets of construction paper and seven sheets of writing paper to each member of your

household. The construction paper will serve as the front and back covers of a booklet. On the front cover, ask each one to write the words "LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR." On the sheets of writing paper (one for each day of the week), encourage each one to write ways in which they plan to "fulfill the Law" through acts of love and service. Young children may be encouraged to draw pictures. Invite each one to select pictures from magazines to illustrate their daily acts and to select a picture for the front cover. Assemble all the sheets of writing paper and construction paper and 3-hole punch the pages and attach with brass fasteners. Encourage each one to keep their booklets as reminders of the joys of love and service and obeying God's commandments.