

## **Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (July 12, 2020)**

Rev. Don Beyers, Christ Church, Bolton

As a young man I had the good fortune to attend a Catholic university and study in the in the classic humanities tradition. All undergraduate students, regardless of their intended field of study (law, business, medicine, etc...), were required to study a diverse range of subjects. All of us took courses in modern and classical languages, literature, arts, philosophy, theology, sciences, history, anthropology, and maths to name but a few. To be sure, many of us lamented the tremendous course loads we had to take on and yearned to get right to our desired subjects. Few of us had time to read Aristotle while also studying physics, but the founders of the university strongly believed we would benefit from a broad and inclusive education.

Like my peers, I didn't fully appreciate the value of studying so many subjects. I was interested in language and culture, not in maths and sciences. While I had an interest in religion and theology, I was tired by the long lectures and readings of classic Christian writers. I had little time for St. Anselm of Canterbury's proofs for the existence of God or St. Thomas Aquinas' monumental work, the *Summa Theologica*. Rather, I wanted to get into more practical and interesting topics in theology. Yet that was not for me to decide.

Instead, I faithfully went to class and listened to our professor, Father Peter Wong, lecture on the early Christian writers. Father Wong was a strict, yet gentle professor. His enthusiasm for theology was ever so apparent in his lively and animated lectures. In retrospect, I wish I had spent more time with him, as I learned a few years later that he was a Chinese priest who suffered tremendous persecution in China. He was a holy priest who cared deeply for his students and a man whose faith endured tests of faith you and I will never know.

Father Wong was the priest who introduced us to one of the greatest works of Christian literature, the *Confessions* by St. Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was Roman citizen who lived in North Africa in an area that is now Algeria. His father, Patricius, was likely a prominent figure and his mother, Monica, a devout Christian who later would be acclaimed for her holiness and named a saint. Augustine was clearly a brilliant man, and was highly regarded for his intelligence. While his mother yearned for him to live the Christian way of life, his father wanted his son to know the world.

Augustine himself would later write of how he was consumed by hedonism and was encouraged by his father to enjoy his many escapades.

Augustine's intellectual and spiritual curiosity got the better of him while living in Rome in his early twenties. At first he was drawn to a sect of Christianity known as Manichaeism, a group that believed the created world was evil and the spiritual world good. With time, however, Augustine was disappointed by the teachers of the religious sect and later embraced a philosophical movement known as scepticism. During this time, he journeyed to the city of Milan and heard the bishop of that city, St. Ambrose, preach a sermon that deeply moved him. Ambrose embraced Augustine like a son and the two cultivated a deep and abiding friendship that eventually led to Augustine's baptism and reception into the Christian Church at the Easter Vigil in 387 in the Cathedral of Milan. Within a few years of his baptism, Augustine was ordained a priest and soon after a bishop.

Author of several books and numerous sermons, Augustine's most famous work remains his *Confessions*. While not a terribly easy text to read, the *Confessions* is perhaps one of the most important books in Christian literature and continues to speak to Christians today. Although we may assume the book is Augustine's confession of his life — which he does reveal his difficult conversion story — it is more importantly a confession of faith, or articulation of what he believes. By sharing his difficult journey of faith, Augustine reveals what he came to know and believe about God, Jesus, and the Christian way of life.

Fundamentally, Augustine wrestles with his desire to know and live what is true and good with his emotional and physical desires for wealth, fame, and pleasure. Although a difficult book, the *Confessions* is a perfect read for anyone struggling to find God in the midst of all the noise and distractions of this world. Having read it as a young man and taught it years later as a faculty member at the same university, I can confidently say it is an essential read for any serious Christian. Although written over 1,500 years ago, the *Confessions* addresses challenges women and men continue to face today.

I am reminded of my university years and earlier reading of the *Confessions* as I read the collect and gospel lesson for this Sunday. The collect for today quotes one of the most famous lines from Augustine's *Confessions*: "Almighty God, you have made

us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” One could say the line encapsulates the heart of the *Confessions* as well as the Gospel. We find our meaning and purpose only when we are rooted in the living God. The emptiness, the longing that we have in the depths of our heart, will only be satisfied by a deep and abiding relationship with the living God.

Admittedly, that is easy to say but harder to do. I think if we’re honest with ourselves, we realise we are easily distracted and led to believe that other experiences or objects will satisfy the longings of the human heart. We spend most of our lives labouring for our dream home, perfect car, fantastic holidays, and ideal retirement. We succumb to the latest trends and fashions, believing that if we have certain things, we will be happy. Yet we remain empty, longing for purpose and meaning.

The emptiness is particularly felt in places we would least expect. I read one study of young professionals living in the downtown core of Toronto. While many of them had successful careers, impressive salaries, stunning condos, and projected happy lives on social media, most of the participants expressed significant levels of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Several shared they went from one relationship to another, often not knowing the names of the persons they were with, all in a desperate search to satisfy the longings of their hearts. Although the study was not a religious one, I couldn’t help but think of the young adults as modern-day Augustines in search of some purpose or meaning.

Despite our turning to material goods and social experiences as a way to nurture and satisfy our hearts, I think we understand deep down inside the futility of our quest. I think we know that ultimately there is only one thing that will satisfy us. In fact, researchers saw an online surge of interest in God, faith, and spirituality over the past few months of this global pandemic. Perhaps our time of imposed confinement has forced us to consider what is really important in life.

Sadly, however, the Christian Church has retreated in this time. While many individual faith communities have creatively responded to the need, several commentators have noted the near silence of Church leaders from across the globe. Instead, church doors were locked in England, Canadian bishops declared a sabbath time, and religious leaders such as the Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury have gone silent. Yet people still search for God in the silence.

If our hearts can only be satisfied by the living God, then how do we open ourselves to God to be nourished and fed by him?

Augustine strives to answer that question in his *Confessions*. So, too, does Matthew in his retelling of Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed. Both make clear that while God freely gives of himself to us, it is up to us whether or not we receive God. While I leave you to read Augustine's *Confessions* and learn what he has to say about this, I want to take a few moments to consider Matthew's understanding of today's parable and what it might have to say about opening our hearts to God.

I first want to clarify something about Matthew's presentation of the parables in his gospel. While many of us find the parables difficult to understand — which they are — we tend to see them from a positive point of view. By that I mean, we want to understand ourselves as the ones who “get” the message of Jesus. Take today's parable of the sower and seeds: most of us will want to think of ourselves as the the final seeds, namely the ones sown on good ground. Understandably, we don't want to be compared to the seed that is sown on rocky ground and who fail to keep faith when things are rough; nor do we want to be compared to the seed sown among thorns and are quickly distracted by the lure of the world's wealth. We want to be the seed which hears the word and bears much fruit.

The thing is, we misunderstand the purpose of parables in Matthew's gospel if we read them in this way. Matthew uses the parables to illustrate Jesus as the great teacher and the real cost of following him, as Ian Boxall notes in his reflection upon this text: “The Matthean parables highlight the role fo Jesus as the great teacher of the kingdom of the heavens, and the higher righteousness demanded of those who wish to enter it. The harsh demands of discipleship, as laid out in the Sermon on the Mount, are exemplified by brief parabolic sayings.”<sup>1</sup> While we all very much want to be the seed that grows in good soil and is fertile, much will be expected of us.

Discipleship is not simply an act or gesture of saying we want to follow Jesus. Rather, discipleship demands a total and complete dedication to Jesus and his Gospel. That dedication demands real sacrifice. And if we follow Jesus, we will have to endure a difficult path and accept that we will be ridiculed by those of the world, and perhaps even by fellow Christians.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Boxwell, *Discovering Matthew: Content, Interpretation, Reception*, 98-99.

It makes no sense to the world why anyone would want to sacrifice life's luxuries only to serve and love others. Yet that is precisely what Jesus calls us to do. Remember the Beatitudes uttered by Jesus? Jesus tell us blessed are they who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, who are pure of heart and peacemakers. And most difficult of all, Jesus says blessed are those who are persecuted, insulted, and say all kinds of evil about them, for the Kingdom of Heaven shall be theirs.<sup>2</sup> By the world's standards, it is absolutely absurd that any of us would deny ourselves to be poor in spirit and seek just and peace, all the while being mocked by others for our seeming foolishness and naiveté.

Yet it is in denial of self that we actually find true peace. It is in giving of ourselves as gift to others, living as Jesus Christ in the world today, that we discover our true happiness and fulfilment, for it is only then that our hearts truly rest in God.

The problem is, many of us Christians are more like the seed that falls upon rocky ground. Our faith is weakened when things get tough. Although it is perhaps an extreme example, I think of Christians who protest the wearing of face masks during this pandemic because it is tough or goes against their religious beliefs. If wearing a mask to save other people's lives is difficult, how willing are you to make real sacrifices so that all can enjoy the fruits of God's creation? Or to give another example, I wonder how Christians can say "all lives matter" in response to the phrase "black lives matter" and yet still comfortably read Jesus parable of the shepherd going out in search of the one lost sheep?<sup>3</sup>

If we truly yearn to find the peace that God can only give, if we really desire to find true peace in our hearts, we have to accept that we will have to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus. Jesus makes that abundantly clear to his disciples when he says: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:3-12

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:12-14