

Oct. 18, 2020

Psalms 148-150

1st Corinthians 10: 13

Some of you know that when Hurricane Sally came through these parts, she took part of the dam to my pond with her. Now we really like our pond and want to keep it, but the bigger problem is that we have to drive over that dam to get to our house. Three or four days after our mud slide, I decided to go check out the rushing water I was still hearing from one of the drain pipes. David and the boys were on the dam with a contractor who was there to give us a quote for the repair. I carefully made my way back into the woods. It was soggy, but not too bad. I took a step and immediately sunk to my knee. I looked for a place I could brace my other foot to pull my stuck one out. When I pulled, I left my shoe in the muck which immediately closed around it, and my other foot sunk in the muck up to my ankle. I struggled to find something stable and sturdy to hold onto, slipping and falling as I tried to backtrack. I emerged from the woods covered with red clay, barefoot, with one shoe held over my head. I made it. On my own. I felt silly and embarrassed, but I got out of the situation with a bruised ego, stained clothes, and a missing sneaker. Not so bad.

But it could have been bad. I was foolish and I was arrogant. Were it not for the steadfast tree that I balanced myself with, I could have found myself in quite a mess, waist deep in mud and to embarrassed to call for help.

As I reflected on our reading from 1st Corinthians 10:13 today, I thought about how often I get myself into messes. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able."

Even more comforting, he follows with, "but [God] will with the temptation also make a way to escape that ye may be able to bear it." Paul's hopeful words come on the heels of his admonition to the Corinthians to be careful about their daily rituals—which are getting too close to their former idolatry for Paul's comfort.

I wonder how often I deserve Paul's admonition. How often do I get caught up in making it through the next thing that I have to do that I don't even recognize the darkness or temptation as a dance with sin—maybe not an 80s slow dance, but too close for comfort nonetheless. In times of tribulation we comfort ourselves with the idea that God will not give us more than we can carry. We ignore the second half of Paul's message that there is an alternative to merely bearing the burden—that God gives us a way to escape the temptation in order that we may bear it. There is some choice—some free will implied here.

But Paul issues the warning: "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." Be humble. Be careful—or you will fall and be covered in sticky red clay.

For some of us, this is far more easily said than done. Our culture, after all, measure success, intelligence, strength, based on how tall we stand. So we strive to stand—even in our religious lives we often seek approval for all manner of things—the appearance of a godly persona, the service that we engage in, the money that we donate, the positions we hold. I don't know about you, but my personal need for approval from others is one of the only things that cuts across all aspects of my life. And when I'm in that space, I'm destined to fail.

So what is it that can provide escape so that I can bear the failure of resisting temptation, of thinking I am strong, of, ultimately, feeling silly and ashamed because I am covered in mud and should have known better?

The Gospel further complicates my desire to "get it right." When Jesus asks Peter who he is, Peter correctly identifies him as the Messiah and Jesus, knowing that Peter's understanding comes from God, appoints Peter as the rock of His Church. Peter gets rewarded for seeing the Truth. But then Jesus insists that Peter and the other disciplines keep this amazing revelation to themselves.

Peter has permission to discern—to "bind" and "loose" on the earth and it will be so in Heaven—but he cannot tell anyone how or why. Can you imagine how frustrating?!? Peter must have wondered, as we humans so often do, WHY?

In her beautiful novel, *The Weight of Ink*, Rachel Kadish writes, "Do not consider then, however learned you are, that your knowledge is complete. For learning is the river of G-d and we will drink of it throughout our lives."

We study. We worship. We sing. We praise. All with the hope of seeing just a glimmer of the God who made this wonderful world. And we mess up. We get muddy. And when we do, we follow the directions of the Psalms and join with God's creation to praise God—to sing a new song. And in so doing, we are able to bear it when we fail to resist temptation. IN our ignorance, we rest in the assurance that God listens to our songs and guides our feet when we dance and holds us close, especially when we are covered in mud.