

“Psalm 1 – Teaching Our Children”

How many of you memorized the first psalm, Psalm 1, during your youth? Maybe we memorized it during confirmation classes, Sunday School classes, or during home devotions with our parents or grandparents. Our elders knew the first psalm was a good beginning point for our immature faith and our lack of life experiences.

By the time we reach the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grades, we are beginning to have some pretty serious questions and doubts about who God is and what he does. It seems that so far our families have provided us with everything we need, a house, clothes, plenty of food, cash to go to the movies or a basketball game, a ride when we need it, - so where does God fit into all of this? Some parents seem not to need God as they drop us off at the Sunday School door and head for a restaurant while other parents seem very dependent on God in worship, in prayer, in daily activities throughout the week.

Then we come to Sunday School and confirmation classes. We memorize the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, and the Ten Commandments which give us hard and straight answers about who God is, and what he does. We come to memorizing the first psalm which gives us hard and straight answers about who God is and what he does.

The first three verses are very straight-forward about how we are to live our life according to God's purpose for us. Children of God, verses 1-3, tell us how we do it. Listen to the wisdom of the old psalmist, “Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful! Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and they meditate on his law day and night.

They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper.”

Happy! Young people, do you want to know how to be happy? It’s simple. The wise and old psalmist of today says “don’t walk in the counsel of the wicked, do not follow the advise of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread.

In the July 21st Washington Post, Parma was held up as an example of where people take the wrong path.

The Sun sets on Cleveland in 2016. A CVS in nearby Parma, Ohio, received more opioids than any other drugstore in Cuyahoga County.

At Knuckleheads Bar & Grill, the subject on a sweltering Saturday afternoon was the drug crisis. More specifically, the recent disclosure that the CVS across the street received more pain pills — 6.4 million — over a seven-year period than any other drugstore in Cuyahoga County.

“Location, location, location,” said Mike Gorman, 37, who was drinking and hanging out with friends. “It’s right near the highway, which makes it easy to access” from Cleveland.

And there was the homeless encampment just beyond the CVS, over by the train tracks, behind the strip mall. It’s popular with heroin users, the regulars at the sports bar said.

“It’s a terrible thing, but I don’t blame CVS,” Gorman said, contending that drug companies made large profits and encouraged doctors to prescribe opioids.

The CVS in this white working-class suburb of Cleveland is a three-hour drive and, culturally, even farther from the southern Ohio section of Appalachia that has become widely associated with the opioid epidemic.

But last week's revelation that drug companies saturated the United States with 76 billion pain pills over seven years shows that no corner of the country escaped the drug crisis. Two other drugstores in this city of 80,000 placed second and fifth on the Drug Enforcement Administration's list of Cuyahoga County locations. Wholesalers shipped opioids at 5.4 million and 3.7 million doses respectively to those. The list was disclosed by The Washington Post last week.

The intersection where CVS and Knuckleheads sit is typical for the outskirts of Cleveland, whose border is just a few hundred feet away. It has strip malls occupied by discount stores, and a mom-and-pop lunch counter threatened by the Burger King down the road.

Knuckleheads itself, like its patrons, appears transported here from Cleveland in the exodus to the suburbs that began decades ago. It is a squat stone building with signs promising cheap domestic beer, bar food and a Cleveland Indians game on TV. The men inside drain pints of Budweiser and Miller Lite between smoke breaks in the alley behind a black metal side door.

The pharmacist on duty at the CVS on Saturday declined to comment on the volume of pills sold there, citing company policy.

But Frank Cimperman, 58, Knuckleheads' owner, said he believes "it's only number one because of the highway, and because you can get a prescription filled there 24 hours a day."

Cuyahoga County and nearby Summit County soon will be at the center of the most important legal test of how much responsibility drug companies bear for the opioid epidemic. Barring a settlement, the two counties are scheduled to go to trial in October as the first case

among the consolidated lawsuits brought by about 2,000 cities, counties, Native American tribes and other plaintiffs.

The two counties alone are asking for billions of dollars from companies to help stem the crisis.

In recent years I have presided at 4 funerals for Divinity members dying from drug overdoses. Two of the four died from prescription opiate overdoses for severe back pain. Both were in their 50's.

We have a problem of “following the advice of the wicked and taking the wrong path”.

But it's simple and straight-forward. If you do not walk in the counsel of the wicked, no linger in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seats of the scornful – if your delight is in the law of the Lord and you meditate on his law day and night – then you will be happy. Then you will be like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything you do shall prosper.

“But it is not so with the wicked; they are like chaff which the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes, nor the sinner in the council of the righteous. For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked is doomed”.

The first psalm gives us hard and straight answers about who God is and what he does. We have two choices in life. Life – like this psalm – is organized in a sharp either/or. There is no middle ground. Either be a happy person who enjoys obeying the Word of God, or be a wicked person who refuses to obey. Either end up like a luxuriant tree with plenty of nourishment or be

like chaff which is blown away. Life consists of choices which are not obscure. There will be a judgment. One can stand or one can perish.

We grow older. We become teenagers. We become parents. We become grandparents; men learn how to cry more often. And as we grow older, life becomes less and less either/or, choices become more and more obscure and difficult, and we seem to find ourselves living in a world with less and less order and more and more chaos.

I have come to know many Christians who have experienced life to be unjust, disorderly, and full of surprises. Seven of us spent 4 days in July, living on the Texas-Mexico border in a different world crammed full of injustices, disorder, and constant surprises.

Then we returned to our homes. Life here in Divinity is not the well-ordered, no surprise world of the first psalm. I presided at Bill Rettig's funeral just before we left and upon coming home the funerals of Toni Deitz, Kay Marvin, and Bill Franz. Any of these families and others in our family will tell us that life in anything but either/or and well-ordered. There is much suffering in the land, and so I say to our young people this morning, be patient with us older people as we teach about a world and a faith that is much more complicated than we're sometimes willing to admit. Enjoy your youth and keep asking questions even though our answers will tend to be either/or as we point you to the first Psalm and the Ten Commandments. The rest will come all too soon in your lives.

To the rest of us older people this morning, there is Good News. God knew the Old Testament law; the First Psalm and the Ten Commandments could not change us or save us. So he sent his Son into the world, into our disorder, into our pain, into our wandering, with the

biggest surprise of all. A man who would give us new life now and eternal life beyond the grave.

A man who invites us to come to the table.