

Sermon for 7 September 2025@ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore, Maryland

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-8, 15-18 (*Insert: Alternate Leader/People*); Philemon 1-20; Luke 14:25-33

Sermon

When I preached on these texts four years ago, I titled my sermon, "Small talk."

I did that to stress the way each text emphasizes God's rule over us. In the first lesson, the image is of the potter having complete control over the clay. Remember the hymn, "Thou Art the Potter, I am the clay?" "While I am waiting, yielded and still..." It's a powerful image, all our life: We are not in charge. Our call is to learn how to seek what God wants, and to give up everything to follow and to do it. We are very small. That image towers over everything about a healthy church.

Then in the beautiful psalm, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me." "You search out my path and my lying down ..." For it was you who formed my inward parts; " " You knit me together in my mother's womb." It's incredibly challenging, in this time and society where freedom is supposed to be so important, and self-defence so primary ...yet what that means, so much of the time, is not that we expand in good judgment for ourselves or loving treatment of others, but of holding power over everything from our fellow humans to nature itself, as well as life and death. Smallness is the theme in a great deal of who we are, as well as in what happens around us and to us. God knows that is not the message of our politics, so clearly, these days.

In the story of the slave, Onesimus, who ran away from his master, Philemon, the point of Paul's letter is powerfully that the slave, now a convert to Christianity, is to be accepted by his former master, Philemon. Not that he is to stop being a slave, but that slaves can be Christians and so can slave-holders, even if it takes generations and centuries to make that settle into wholesome social arrangements. Long before we are equal ... as God knows we are saying again and again in all the immigration circumstances in this country and around the world, social restrictions and wealth versus poverty and ability versus handicaps, all play out in ways that, in human relations, are fundamental. Justice for the weak and love for all levels of creatureliness. We can hardly grow without greatly changing day by day on this topic, following Jesus.

Finally, in the Gospel, be sure the word "hate" is a strained translation of what Jesus is expressing. We're assured that in his language, in his day, and in his constant teaching, what he means is what our large commitment is. Nothing is second to love. Nothing can really grow in our hearts and habits without that, with everything else being secondary, or as we may say, "small." Nothing allows God into our total being, our mind, our body, our spirit, but surrender to what we gradually see is God's love

Small talk.

Both as individuals, and as a fellowship. In the risen body of Jesus. Learning how to be one is our single task. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

Amen.