

Sermon for 21 June 2020 @ Bethesda UMC

Third Sunday after Pentecost/Father's Day

Scriptures: Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

*"Hard Times"*

Being Jesus's body, church doesn't smooth over the rough places.

We know that. Time and again, we ask for relief, and receive courage and strength instead. Waking up, we do feel stronger; some things that were really big yesterday have gotten a lot smaller; we see a part of the problem that's specifically ours, not someone else's, and feel directed to work on that; a bit of beauty catches our heart's eye and we have time and will to savor that.

The rhythm of our lives of faith is full of unplanned stuff. Not knowing gets more prominent the older I get, and some of that's wonderful, some's not. What we're truly after, as the saints and scriptures remind us over and over again, is fellowship, not control. God is so interested in what we think, so intent on improving our tolerance, expanding our insight, getting us ready for more important work ... and all because we're so intriguing, so fascinating to talk to and walk with .... That's what it says. That's what the Good Book says. "And God saw what God had done, everything that was made, and it was good."

But applying that to the times we're in is always ahead of our sights.

We may be Americans, where self-development is highly respected, and freedom is at least the dream ... but it's sure easy here in the land of the free to be cynical and scared, and mad @ the other guy!

These are hard times.

So the Bible gives us Sarah, and Hagar, and that moving vision of her hopelessness, because it's part of our social history. Always. Right now the mood, the spotlight, is on guilt. We've got a flawed system, and lots of heavy lifting is the only agenda, wherever we look.

Have you ever been in marriage counseling, or AA, or stage 4 cancer treatment? How do I get through that? Who are my friends then? Even one hour a week seems too much time to focus on my part of the problem, or my side of the treatment-routine... the one that goes on 24 hours a day after the thirty-minute appointment.

And what do I give you when you come to church? More medicine I don't like. Paul tells his friends in Rome it's nothing but work to let grace take over your life. Every minute, you're undoing old patterns and taking deep breaths just to stay alive with Jesus. His life is training, re-working, learning a new way. Life, not death. New life, like his.

And Jesus himself, in Matthew's Gospel for today? It sounds like a stern father's lecture! "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor the slave above the master..." Not politically correct. "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

On this day when we pay attention to what my great-aunt called "this man's world," and say thank you to a lot of kindness that's come through a very patriarchal, unbalanced system of rank ... the Bible makes sure I get my come-uppance as a white male father. I get just enough adulation to run on ... and then the spigot gets turned off and church moves on to other issues.

How can I thank God for the incredible good news that's in the paper every day? McDonogh School is considering changing its name because its founder said no colored boys should be allowed there. Loyola Blakehurst is receiving requests to change its name because its founder made his fortune as a slave-holder. I know that sounds trivial ... but that's the kind of things we talk about in marriage counseling and in AA. Little stuff that covers big stuff, because the big stuff can only be changed in bits and baby steps.

Don't talk to me about police. We've been in trouble over justice since the beginning, when the Quakers tried to get us to call prison the penitentiary because the idea was repentance and renewal ... and when a columnist like my friend Dan Rodricks has been giving a large part of his attention to folks coming out of jail for the past couple of decades. There are beautiful things calling us to celebrate and get involved in. There is praying to learn how to do, on a daily, routine, life-giving basis, everywhere we turn.

I need help. I'm supposed to make this appealing ... you're supposed to say "Amen!" "Glory!" and get to work ... as if you weren't already ... at your age ... with your problems ... Mercy!

Hard times!

Praise the Lord!

Amen.