

Sermon for Sunday 19 July 2020 @ Bethesda

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 26-43

*"Tough love"*

How timely that the first lesson describes a new relationship to a familiar place! Jacob, on the run from his angry brother Esau, sleeps at a place where Abraham first encountered God and received the promise of becoming the founder of a new people. The commentators connect the ladder on which angels descend and ascend with the Mesopotamian *ziggurats*, "temple towers where Divine and human meet." Here we are "opening" our church for worship, and the connections with the past, the present, and the future are very much on our minds, with all the awe and promise that brings home to us. The story makes it clear that God, not Jacob, is in charge, and that places do have special significance...and so we hear for ourselves as well as for the traditional story of our faith.

Psalm 139 is one of the most intimate descriptions of the believer's experience of God, and once again makes it clear that God is in charge, not we, always. I remember a dear friend who, when I visited her in hospital and asked her what was her favorite text, said, "Psalm 139."

Romans continues a magnificent teacher's deeply personal description of a faith-walk, not only teaching new converts but reaching to the top of human imagination about the whole universal setting. The description of everything being born, created, heading towards an outcome we cannot see but can sense, is a great image for all that puzzles and beckons, entices and frightens, anyone willing to reflect and observe and strive to grow. Everything from hearing God's voice saying, "You are my child. Now behave like it," to "of course you suffer...now, live in hope," is offered as guidance, not just for us individually, but for families, partnerships, nations, congregations ... everything. Hard to read this without weeping, every time.

And finally, the Gospel reading provides an image of church life that each of us returns to over and over ... of course to remind ourselves that we as a body are forever called to non-judgmental tolerance with everyone beyond our own religious boundaries, but more poignantly than that, with those in the congregation where we belong, we are to endure and allow even as we set boundaries and accept for ourselves forgiveness beyond anything we could give if we were truly in charge.

So, everything we're offered today is clear, and familiar ... and very tough to take.

Unless we see that, we are dangerous weeds, having no rightful place in the Biblical picture of all things. I can cut loose and cite personal opinions from A to Z ... and of course you would be the first to tell me that's the preacher's favorite temptation. To be given a little authority is so ...well, you've watched it enough...

Better is for me to ask you, "How do you see the whole creation groaning in childbirth right now? What brings you back to optimism these days? What do we make of the many people who say "I can't stand politicians!" ? What about the funeral director last week who told me "Black Lives Matter" is a cop-out? And what do you think of my response to him...if you can imagine what I said, or what you have said, when someone said something like that within your hearing recently? What about the niece of one of the members of Mother Emmanuel Church in Savannah who was murdered, who, a preacher herself, says she's not into forgiveness yet, but lament. "When we are denied our right to lament, it suggests that our lives don't matter ... not even to us." ? Or the protest marcher who suggests more people are marching because they've lost the middle class routines that kept them from understanding what poor people face in this country? "Where the state gives up, the people have no choice but to work together. "

Over and over we are being offered new life. When we hear the Bible's deep theme, we join in worshipping and following its call. We recognize God's hand on our shoulder, and do what is simple and clear and right in front of us. I get so exasperated recognizing faults in myself I saw @ seventeen, or 35 ... and still I'm doing them! And then, something turns up, and I'm either being thanked for something, or watch something I touched bear a good harvest! I think about Mike, bending his truck into a hairpin turn around one of D.C.'s circles, and I realize how many of us actually work miracles every day, and the Lord allows it.

Tough love. We're seeing it, every day. God help us endure and persevere and produce and hold onto the plow, and not complain too much... in this great business we've joined and even get paid to work in, along with so many saints.

Tough love.

God's love, through Jesus Christ.

Amen.