

Sermon for Sunday 26 July 2020 @ Bethesda

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

*"Understanding God"*

Please don't take me the wrong way. I'm not suggesting I understand God, or expect you to. I'm working on the Apostle Paul's radical assumption that God understands us.

He gets going in today's part of his letter to the church @ Rome, and Christians have been nodding and shaking and scratching their heads ever since. The commentary I used devoted three and one-half pages to this passage from Romans...more space than to any of the other texts for today. Look @ some of the things he says: God has created a world God will eventually straighten out, redeem, and has put God's spirit in us, the "first fruits" of God's redemption ...but precisely for that reason, we experience the redemption process as suffering. Of course, it's "mingled with patience and hope." Does that sound familiar? Are you more patient some days than others? Have you been in pain that didn't end ... until it did?

Paul says, the Spirit (that's God, or a part of God we know) "helps us in our weakness." I hear someone in the back saying, "Better had; couldn't make it otherwise." Like this week: How are we going to survive without classroom schooling? How long does this go on before the whole thing caves in? It's a cosmic thing, after all, like global warming, or throwing away the atom bomb for good. We do not know what to pray ... or even *how* to pray. Forget preachers; forget Bible study ..."anxious sighing" is more like what we do these days...like the end is near ...

And here we get into translation issues, which always come with scripture, which sprang from many sources, scraps of parchment and competing dates and places, campfire tales passed around for countless generations. For instance, when Paul says, the Spirit intercedes for us, does that mean the Spirit takes our moans and puts words to them? NRSV says, "For that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." REV says that "Through our inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us." JB offers a happy compromise: "The Spirit expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words."

I'm just on page two of the commentary! My point is that you all can go home this week and read today's lesson every day as your devotional, and get fruitful reflection. You don't even have to agree. There is a genius @ work here, over time, that makes our silence, and our self-discipline, produce. Set a time, read the passage, then be still afterwards, don't solve the questions, only acknowledge them and watch them pass on down the river ... You will find yourself teaching yourself in new ways, sometimes in big revelations, more often just in a sense of companionship that you are not alone when you pray. You don't really read scripture unless you pray while doing it.

If God understands ... what does that say about MY understanding? Does that mean my inner peace ...God's peace in me ...is understanding for someone I meet this day? Does the Spirit work like that, God and us mixing and the outcome not our doing but not happening without us?

Are we that essential? Does God just not get things done unless we, as St. Theresa of Avila says, are "God's hands and feet?" Do we need to exercise with the Spirit? Is that what we're doing here together, working out together so we can come out from here and be useful not only to ourselves but to our neighbor?

This is solitary business, this Christian living and dying. It seems more lonesome right now than ever before ...and yet I've found more to think about, more not-loneliness, because I COULD take time and think about it, than my life has ever given me before. This being old, and retired, is just as full of surprises as the first part: I've got questions; I hear viewpoints and see things going on, that give me second thoughts and third thoughts every bit as much as I ever did before I got so wise, or so slow! Does that mean God is at work, same as always, teaching, pulling the rug out from under my strong opinions, or tamping down the ground around the firm foundations I know I want to keep?

Understanding God. Can we give ourselves to the idea, the breath, the imagination, of a real God more on our side than we've ever acted like? These two Black men who died last week: can that be God at work teaching us what we need to do in our talk, and our walk, this week? Turn off the news, maybe ... but don't pass by this time of opportunity to do a new thing for human well-being, or kids' opportunity, or even something overseas that we believe needs our dollar or prayer or correspondence?

Look at Paul this week, and think again. See what you see. Take him with you.

As for the other scriptures, they've got points too ... it's just that Paul was so intense I couldn't pull loose from him, once I got to the heart of understanding God ... God understanding ... God treating me as though I might learn to love being understood... through Jesus Christ.

Amen.