

Sermon for Sunday 16 August 2020 @ Bethesda UMC

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 20-32; Matthew 15:10-28

"God meant it for good."

"You know the five stages of grief ----denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance? I think the American people are in all five of them ---but different parts of the country are in different stages." That quote was in the August 12 issue of *The Christian Century Magazine*. It was made by Emily Landon, a coronavirus expert at the University of Chicago, on the national response to the pandemic.

Then in the summer issue of *The Johns Hopkins Magazine*, in an article entitled "Losing Touch," a Hopkins pediatric intensivist and anesthesiologist powerfully describes coming down with the virus, quarantining at home as she sickened and survived in the guest bedroom isolated from her husband and their two school-age children. She returned to life with her family and work, seeing more deeply how hard it is "holding the iPad for a man's last conversation with his wife" (who, of course, couldn't be with him) "or comforting a daughter who can't be with her mother in her final hours..." She says "I came to terms with an unexpected emotion: survivor's guilt. I still struggle with this question to this day. There may never be an answer, but there is a way to make it better." She explains, "Surviving COVID-19 has spurred me to look for every way possible to give back, to pay it forward. My kids and I now volunteer to make personal protective equipment for health care workers. I curate the latest COVID-19 research for my colleagues, both locally and on social media.....and I donated a liter of my plasma, rich in COVID-19 antibodies, to help a critically ill patient who wasn't as lucky as me. Most importantly, I go back to work each day, to fight this disease for the patients who continue to come through our doors."

Then I share a couple of quotes from an article in the August 20 issue of *The New York Review of Books* entitled, "We must act out our freedom." The author, a Black man himself, quotes Frederick Douglass speaking on July 5, 1852, on the *Declaration of Independence*. "This Fourth of July is yours, not mine," Douglass told his audience in Rochester, New York. He said slavery made a mockery of the country's principles. Think of the courage and articulateness of his saying that then, and there! The article closes with these words by Isidore Dharma Douglas Skinner, a great-great-great-great grandchild of Douglass: "...someone once said that pessimism is a tool of white oppression, and I think that's true. I think in many ways we are still slaves to the notion that it will never get better. But I think that there is hope and I think it's important that we celebrate black joy and black life and we remember that change is possible, change is probable, and that there's hope."

Today Joseph reconciles with his brothers. In a later chapter Joseph actually says, "God meant it for good," speaking of their crime against him and his current ability to save them from starvation as they cowered before him.

In the Gospel reading, we see Jesus refusing to help an outsider woman. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” And she stands up to him. Imagine telling that story when you’re seeking to convert people to the faith of the disciples after Jesus’ death! But there it is, right there in Matthew, the most Jewish of the four Gospels in the accepted canon of the church.

We all know these are perilous times, full of surprise, very different from anything we’ve experienced. We know in this little church we are at the edge of our capacity to survive. We know we are the fortunate ones, worshiping together, doing things many cannot. We know it’s not only the pandemic and the political chaos and the economic uncertainty, either. We are facing more than we’ve ever been willing to before, the tragic flaws and barriers in our group life.

We will meet as a church after the 10:30 service to review and propose and to decide on important issues facing us not next season, but now. I’ve spelled out some of them last week. New people must step forward to take positions, and experienced people must invite and encourage and help to change our diversity in this congregation; and we must do it with optimism and hope, just like that stubborn woman insisting Jesus heal her daughter, and just like Joseph was telling his brothers this was now a good thing, not a past to dwell on.

Let me be specific in just one example. In our adult Sunday School classroom, where all our hymnals are currently stacked, there are not just one, not just two, but three wall pictures of a white Jesus. It didn’t strike me before. Those pictures should no longer be on our walls. It may seem like a small thing, but not now, and not here. Jesus was not white. We do not aim to be a white church. “Time’s a-wastin!” as L’il Abner’s Snuffy Smith would say.

Let us pray: Dear God, help us now to complete this service in love and respect for you and one another. Guide us in all we will face in the week ahead. Thank you for loving us, and teaching us, moment by moment, how to love you and each other, and ourselves....and, as we go into this church-wide meeting after the benediction, give us the charity and good sense to decide wisely on these pictures and many other things.

In Christ’s name we say,

Amen.