

Sermon for Sunday 2 August 2020 @ Bethesda

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7,15; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

“God’s people”

This fellow Jacob is a scoundrel, a trickster, a crook.

If we take seriously the Bible’s insistence that God, after getting so disgusted with humankind as to destroy all but one family by flooding the earth ... and then promises, with the rainbow, never to do that again; and then decides to start over, with one person, Abraham, and pledges to make a whole people faithful, to demonstrate what it means to live right, to treat one another right, and to love the center of everything the way that Center loves them and everything If, as I say, we take this story seriously, we have to hand it to those old Middle Eastern story-tellers: They knew how to spin a tale! They know how to get us to pay attention, and say, “Yeah, that’s us; God’s people; the best, the examples, the ones everybody sprang from, the models ...” and then to put this guy Jacob forth as the founding father, the one whose twelve offspring become God’s chosen ones ... Well, they’ve got us!

Who are we, to think we’re so special? Who are we, to think we understand the course of history, and where it’s headed next? What kind of model are we? God’s people, indeed!

Put that in your mind, and then watch Jacob getting put through the traces, now rich, now the father of many children, headed back to that brother he cheated from the beginning ... and see him spend another night, just as he did at the start of his career, meeting with the Lord of all history ... Look at his “mochsi,” or whatever it is the Jews call it, to stand up to the dark stranger and insist on a blessing And at the end of the night, watch him limp away, blessed and hampered, marked and in some deep way altered and grown up ...

Take that as Lesson One for today: Life is hard. You don’t learn easily, and you’re not the same after any real lesson. Period.

Then let the Psalm sing about that, “Life is tough; help! “ The deepest thought we ever have is that: “ Help!” As long as we live, we’re forever saying, in the dead of night, at whatever altar we find ourself, on whatever mission, whatever we manage to articulate, part of it is a lament: “This is hard! This hurts! Help! Amen. “ Lesson two.

Then listen to Paul, who never gives up teaching, with his last breath and walking in his most worn-out sandals and facing his absolute end, whether we ever figure out how his life closed or not: Today he says, “For all my love of Jesus, in spite of all the pull he has over me, soul and body, I can’t give up on my own people. The Jews have the promise, the patriarchs, they are God’s chosen...I’d rather die myself than give up that part of God’s truth and God’s way of loving all creation into joy” Never, never let go of that, you Christians!

And then sit with all that for a moment. Think what torment and scorn Christian civilization has inflicted, and still does inflict, on the Jews. We're now, dreadfully and blessedly, in another of those moments when awful abuse, historical horror, imbedded into our very structures and psyches, abuse of one class against another, is being faced. We're met, day after day and virus after virus, with the harm we participate in, through our genes, in our instincts And take courage, incredible as that seems, shameful as it makes us all, that this is the way God has been working as long as those old folks who thought up Scripture and learned to use it as a guide and tool for growth in loving, this is how God works, more often than not: Face up to your guilt; respect the work of those who have risen above it ... learn from your mistakes ... Start at home, and learn to be deeply, truly human, little by little and bit by bit. Lesson 3. God's people.

But this is special, this day. For the first time in months, we're able and willing to share what we call the Lord's supper at both services here @ Bethesda. We'll go to the table, figuratively, in just a moment. We've set the background: Orneriness, shame, stubbornness, and yet insisting here in God's Spirit that we are, and shall be, blessed and healed and given another chance to try on loving, both ourselves, and one another. Remember as we do it this new time, that this version of it in Matthew says very important things about sharing the Lord's supper: 1) People were hungry ... and Jesus said, "Feed them." How? "You do it." Communion is first of all an act of generosity, of responding to need. The disciples wanted to send the crowds away. They said, it's too much for us. Jesus said, "Give them something to eat." 2) It's a family thing. The people of Israel ... those from whom we Christians, in all our guilt and shame over acting superior ... the family our Leader sprang from and never, ever left ... had this act, this table sharing @ the center of their lives...the disciples did nothing unfamiliar as they followed Jesus' instructions and shared the resources of mealtime, nourishment, picnic you could say in that setting ... It was a family thing. It comes naturally to us, when we let the Lord use us as the Lord asks us to do.

So it is for us.

Come. Another time I'll share with you my concerns about how we're doing as a congregation, and how I'm doing as your pastor. I've talked with some of you already.

Right now, feed one another. Feed me. Let me feed you. Remember whence you sprang, and take courage, the Lord is with us, we will go forth from here limping, and blessed.

Praise God.

God's people. Only special in the sense of being used to bear fruit and do good and fade into the crowd of ALL PEOPLE ... God's people.

Amen.