

Sermon for Sunday 23 August 2020 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124 (846 in UMH); Romans 12 :1-8 ; Matthew 16 :13-20
« Gifts »

Both my parents were the first generation of their families to graduate from college. My dad, son of a cash-poor but respectable farmer in the German/Bohemian area near Austin, Texas, told how his father said, "I'll send you to college;" but after the first year post-high school, Dad could see it wouldn't happen, and so he struck out on his own and worked his way through the University of Texas. Years later, my nephew drove Dad through the Capitol grounds in Austin and Dad commented, "Now drive around again," so he did; and when he finished, Dad said, "Now drive around again." When Steve asked what was going on, Dad replied, "To support myself, I had a job near here driving a society matron around Austin in her surrey, and I promised myself that someday I'd have somebody drive me around ... and you just did."

My Mom responded fully to her seamstress mother's dream to have her "get an education," and, one way and another, also proudly graduated from UT. She told of having friends who invited her to supper while she was in college: Six grown children and the father and mother ... and the supper was bread and butter and jam... period. Very respectable ... I met one of the daughters, very independent, a teacher, many years later.

We are starting another foundational story in the Bible today, continuing this central theme of our religious beginnings, that insists God is re-producing the human race one by one and one people at a time, with the aim of bringing all creation to fulfilment as one beloved human race along with all the plants and animals and stars The whole show ... as it was already destined to be, in God's eye, from the beginning.

To back this up, we use a psalm, or group chant, that imbeds the central message in our psyche: "If it hadn't been for God, we'd never have made it! Trust in God!"

What I want to specialize in today is our third lesson, from Paul's letter to the young Christian community at Rome. Backed up by all this tradition we've just described, Paul says to this motley group of Jews and Gentiles gathered in some house-church, who are just barely agreeing with one another enough to cohere as a fellowship, that the whole point of life is in what they're doing: Working together as a blended group (now the people of God are not just Hebrew, but every religion and no religion, not even comfortable talking one language except that, like modern deaf interpreters, they somehow manage to communicate, build on what little faith had brought them together and kept bringing them back each first day, or Sunday) ... and that THIS was what God intended. Still, you understand, working on that theme of bringing a new and re-built world into being, bit by bit and obstacle by obstacle. Paul beautifully expresses himself by insisting that each one of these gathered folks, in a way nobody could have predicted, and headed for an outcome nobody could see, just had to believe in and work at producing, their individual gifts would be the making of the new creation. Paul is blunt: Nobody should get the big-head about his or her skills ... but by the same token,

nobody was out of the plot, everybody had a part to play, no matter how things started out, no matter who had come and gone, nothing It was not enough to be religious alone, and the new world would not get made without everybody's two cents. Gifts were the theme, and variety was their consistent quality.

Then, as always, we close with a reading from one of the four Gospels, and as we all know, this year we mostly read from Matthew, who has a You can't call it racial, but that comes as close as we can put it in today's terms ... Matthew has a Jewish identity and speaks to a blended fellowship ... as churches by nature will always be ... a blended congregation. What happens in today's reading is that the Messiah, as we call him, although the Jews still don't, and we've talked about that in recent weeks as we read Paul's "yes but" thoughts about God's people and the rest of us ... Jesus just for a minute pushes hard on commitment. "Don't get ahead of the story," Matthew's Jesus says ... "but take what I'm doing with utmost seriousness."

Put all this rambling sermon together with a few strands of conviction: We've no time left to leave the work up to others. We ARE the work. We are TOGETHER because God works in groups ... not because God doesn't work on individuals, but because God is after ONE WORLD, story by story, catastrophe by catastrophe, resurrection by resurrection. That's what's going on @ Bethesda Church, and that's what will continue. Go downstairs and look at the early photos of Bethesda. See how quickly it grew ... Alice Traeger's dad is in one of the early pictures, just a boy. Then there were many years of stability, and as with most churches in recent times, decline. Now, we are at a new moment. What's ahead we don't ever try to predict. All we know is, there are gifts among us nobody should be showing off and nobody should be hiding.

As long as I'm your pastor, I will be sending examples of different approaches to ministry for you to pray over, and I will be insisting our gifts are adequate to whatever occasion God sends.

If I had an old Baptist hymnal, I'd ask us to close with "Work for the Night is Coming." That's all we've got, and it is sufficient. It is not only sufficient, it is the story. "Did you know he played the guitar?" "Did you see what just passed by looking for a home?" "Will you please look up and see the daisies, and the stars, and the needs around here?"

Gifts. We've got them, and they're ours to honor and glorify Just like that family my Mom visited, and then went with into the kitchen afterwards and helped wash and clean up from the feast of bread and butter and jam they'd shared; and just like that third time around the Capitol grounds in Austin that made my Dad satisfied he'd done ... he'd been able to do ... God had led him to do ... as a valuable husband, father, citizen, and family doctor, all those ages ago. His birthday was last Friday, in fact ... born 21 August, 1894.

Gifts. Let us pray. Dear Lord, help us move ahead with our gifts and change the world stone by stone, and precious moment by precious moment, and soul by soul, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.