

Sermon for 1 November 2020 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost/All Saints Sunday

Scriptures: Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

*"I wonder..."*

First let me ask you to follow me in making the sound of "OM" that I've learned in praying with people from eastern traditions. It is actually three sounds blended, A, U, M. I'll make it, and then you follow me. Take a deep breath, and go on for as long as you can, and then be still. "AUM."

We'll talk more about this another time.

Now, let me say, the longer I have this job, the more questions I have. When the District Superintendent appointed me, he said, "This is a good appointment," not as though I should be proud, it didn't seem, but reflectively, as though he felt he'd done something right. He left it at that, and then Buck said his famous, "You again," as we walked up the porch to be introduced.... And then that D.S. retired, and a new one came on, and she then went on to be a bishop, and now we have a third one .... Wanda Duckett ... who is, to my thinking the best of all I've served under.

Fast forward ... and here we are, in times more uncertain than we've ever known, wondering this very week-end whether our democracy will survive this election, uncertain of our own finances, watching more signs of global warming than we've ever had before, looking squarely at more racism in our every institution than anyone has ever been able or willing to do in our history ...

I am convinced we have two choices: Either we duck our heads and wait for the ship to sink, or we try things beyond our capacity, over and over and over. As a congregation, the Lord will either help us fold, or will build up our strength to be useful either as an independent congregation as we are now, or to be a strong force for progress in any union we might make with another congregation.

Whether it's global warming, political regrouping, racial relations, or our own congregational status, there's nothing certain any more.

And here we are, loving Sunday mornings together, sharing encouragements, and the sacrament, and individual burdens, and adapting in ways we never imagined!

I wonder ...

Methodists aren't long on holy days or seasons. We've gotten a lot more meaning out of liturgy in my lifetime ... but this particular Sunday is still fairly new to us....and yet our founder, John Wesley, good Church of England priest that he was, declared this to be his favorite Sunday

of the whole Christian year.... And I put a quotation of his on our outside bulletin board this week, which says, "Our people die well."

Somehow, in the work among the poor, the visiting folks in prison, the weekly 12-step "Class meetings," and all the seriously effective and lasting practices he, and Charles, his brother, building on the belief and gifts of their mother Susannah, and to a lesser degree their priest father, Samuel Wesley, went on to produce and expand over their long careers, there seems to have been a peace-making, peace-giving quality about all the hard things of life in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England that Wesley could see and proclaim.

You heard the scriptures. They come from different aspects of Christian experience. Revelation, for all its beauty, has been abused as a war-cry of colonialism and a concept of a warrior God as fierce and far from Jesus as anything in the Old Testament. Still, its beautiful proclamation of love and lasting peace has pulled us forward through the ages: "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The rest of the texts we can speak of more fully at another time. My intent today is to ask you, and ask us, "I wonder... what is it that my bond with these dear ones we list today prepares me for, calls me towards, here in this troubled time so full of pain and promise? What is it in the calm of death we have faced with them, that will sprout seeds of promise beyond what our people have ever known, much less shown, up through all the ages until now? What are we missing in the present circumstances that is right there before us, aching to be born in and through us?"

I believe nothing less than such honest talk matches the comfort, and the grieving, of this Day. Not next year ... It is blasphemy to keep on electing leaders who deny global warming. It is callous to take one more step as an organization without devoting ourselves to undo the chains of racism that remain around each heart in this great nation. It is untrue to Christ to treat emigrants the way we do any longer. It is weakness not to investigate new ministries now. It is an abomination not to outlaw nuclear weapons, as we this year finally have the chance to do...and here the U.S. and the four other original Security Council nations are vigorously arguing against doing.

I wonder what this means... what obvious solutions ... what painful discussions ... what peace and joy and character-building lie out just beyond what we've done the work to discover?

I wonder ...

Through Jesus Christ,

Amen.