

Sermon for Sunday 18 April 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore 21214

Third Sunday after Easter/Native American Awareness Sunday

Scriptures: Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4 (UMH 741); 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

“Centering”

For the past several years, we have used a “centering” ceremony on this Sunday after Easter when we celebrate and collect an offering for the United Methodist Church’s work among Native Americans, their needs and concerns.

Although we do it “virtually” again this year, using our imagination more than our bodies, we do it in the spirit we have come to recognize in this pandemic era, and its power to reach out and come close to one another.

“Centering” brings us close in ways nothing else quite does. We speak of the tradition of “centering prayer” that the church has reclaimed in our time. I have been to many meetings to learn and grow in this renewal movement, and read books by people who have expanded its strengths. I have learned a basic practice, of finding 20 minutes on many days, in which I sit still, after reading some scripture or prayer, and allow my thoughts to come as thoughts always do, with a nod or wave and then letting them float on down the river of my awareness, with nothing but “Thank you, Lord,” or “I love you, Jesus,” or just a silence without judgment or follow-up. I don’t work any miracles or come away with enlarged vision very much ... but a freedom has gradually grown over the years, so what my grandmother called “nerves” don’t take over quite as much as they used to.

In our honoring of our Native American roots and friendships, we just went in that direction more broadly than much of our society does. We recognized long tradition has brought insight about human nature, and about the ground and sky, and the past, dreams, hopes, that are a part of everything.

On this Sunday of the Great Fifty Days of Eastertide, I hope we can claim this quiet and deep side of the resurrection we call Jesus Christ. In a way, the scriptures we go over today seem scattered and confusing. Peter speaks with more courage than we’ve seen him have. Shining through his preaching is the forgiveness and hope of those earliest, undocumented days. The psalm centers on one group of feelings we can see as we search the Hebrew library of song and chant and surely of movement and dance... the sense of rescue and relief, gratitude and good memories, that are always with us, no matter where we are or where we seem to be headed. Such ability to tap into reassurance was surely part of the Easter revelation, over and over, as it now is for us.

The reading from the First Letter to John gently but firmly insists what we all know, even as the news or the diagnosis or the calendar or the weather changes: We are not just free-floating jellyfish, but people of principle. What we say and do matters, and wrong is not right, dirt is for planting and growing, not for throwing and slipping around in. We ourselves, and our whole race, as well as the rocks and oceans and skunks and comets, have to be honored and managed

and avoided and observed.... Using our language, the “bottom line” is not nearly so monetary as we make it. Food and medicine and power over one another are more .. “Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.”

And then the Gospel, this Sunday taken from Luke, looks at the strange new world the disciples faced. One definition of resurrection that’s been powerful to me this week is, “Waking up.” Maybe getting older brings that home with fresh punches. I get upset. I also get thrilled. Second childhood, maybe, they say ... things I’ve done a hundred times, like listening to someone really tell me something, or having someone really listen to me. I was telling a friend I don’t know how I’ll ever sort through all my stuff so my kids won’t have to do it ... and she said to me, “It’ll be easier for them to do that than for you.” Just a little thought ... but it’s been comforting me a lot.

Waking up. Is that what we’re doing in America, more than when we were fighting wars or going to the moon or even inventing automobiles?

I don’t know. Isn’t it good to hear a preacher say that?

How much time do we have left? What is eternity, anyway? Something about “now?” Are we brave enough to say that? Can we get to the heart of the matter just by listening, and telling, and doing? “You are witnesses of these things.”

Centering. Waking up. Coming alive.

Let us pray. Jesus, Lord among us, have mercy on these police. Let us hear what the lawyers are saying. What is it? Thanks for the extra money we’ve got for some things. Stop this awful dying we keep watching. You are here... and it scares us. Give us the Spirit of hope and kindness we don’t even think we have. Wake us up, to life ... life ... in Jesus Christ.

Amen.