

Sermon for 22 August 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: 1 Kings 8:1,6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84 (UM804); Ephesians 6:10-20;

John 6:56-69

“Grace”

In the first reading for today, the Bible invites us to reflect on the influence of a good ruler. King Solomon prays for himself and all who have power over others, that they ... that he ... all may reflect the goodness and reliability of the One in charge ... that God be reflected in the work of human leadership.

It is also moving to see that he asks God to respect the request of people from other lands and faiths to be cared for, and to have their prayers answered ... thus giving us our faith in God's love for people unlike ourselves, and God's willingness to interact with them as with us.

Psalm 84 builds on the same theme, reflecting our confidence in God's just and tender rule everywhere and always.

In this final Sunday of readings from Paul's letter to the young church at Ephesus, there is both trust and urging going on. Trust this God who has revealed new closeness to all humankind through the story of Jesus Christ; and stand firm, whatever happens, in loyal and brave obedience.

Finally, as we complete five Sundays of reflection on the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, the clear separation between believers and the rest of the world is described. Not only non-converts, classified as “the Jews” by John, but also many who have converted and followed Jesus up until now turn away.

Jesus says flatly, “...no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

I've never known how to handle that idea, either in my believing moods, or when I stood outside the fellowship. I know myself well enough to realize I don't always practice love, or trust, in God. I've also never been sure those we call “unbelievers” are not on the right track, showing love and courage, practicing justice in the full image of God. It's been a problem in my leadership. In marriage, in child-rearing, I've prayed more for confidence than almost anything else ... which means I've suffered and, I'm sure, caused a lot of suffering as well.

John goes on ... remember, this Gospel is a reflection of lots of experience within the church, maybe fifty years or so, and from many widely different communities ... and has Jesus pointedly asking his disciples, “Do you also wish to go away?”

It is a fundamental question.

In character, Simon Peter speaks up, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Impetuous, over-confident, clearly open-hearted Peter! If we needed a picture of power in the hands of Christians, who could do better? In fact, much as we Protestants dislike the idea of a Pope, Peter beautifully makes our point for us ... even as he stands for all the misuse of power in our own ranks as well.

I'm at the point in my sermon where I need someone else to speak for me. William Willimon wrote recently, "A parishioner once said to me, 'I'm lying in this bed, not sure if I'm going to make it out of this alive, frightened and worried, and Jesus has the nerve to waltz in here and suggest that I ought to single-handedly fund the church's food ministry? As sick as I am, I thought, others should be looking after me, not my looking after them."

"And how did Jesus respond?" I asked her.

"As far as I can tell, he said, 'I don't care. What did you think you were getting into when you were baptized?'"

We misinterpret Scripture if we think the disciples found it easy to follow Jesus ... or if Jesus was always sweet-natured, or even sure of what would happen next. Remember, John is writing after the fact, creating a drama for all to ponder over and discuss.

Think of it. Your faith, my experience, are not a matter of being in control, or knowing what's next, or whether I did the right thing yesterday. Unpredictable as it is, we are on an adventure. Or as Stanley Hauerwas quotes the Episcopal Prayer for the Sanctification of Illness: 'Sanctify, O Lord, the sickness of your servant N, that the sense of her weakness may add strength to her faith and seriousness to her repentance; and grant that she may live with you in everlasting life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'"

We are not in control.

Thank God.

Amen.