

Sermon for 8 August 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130 (UM 848); Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35,41-51

***“Working on it...”***

When my former wife of 28 years first took a job with the United Methodist Women’s office at the Board of Global Ministries in New York City, we would exchange phone calls every few weeks between me in Baltimore, and her in her shared apartment in New Jersey. On one such call, after dealing with family news and various on-going details, there came a pause, at the end of which I said, “Sure would be nice to see you back here eventually.” She waited a few moments, and answered, “I’m working on it.”

That came to me as I reflected on today’s scriptures.

This focus on the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, which the lectionary gives us over several Sundays every third year, seems almost to go on forever. As one commentator says, “Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus had pointed Nicodemus beyond birth to Birth and the Samaritan woman beyond water to Water. Here he points his listeners beyond the bread of the evening before, beyond even the manna in the wilderness that their ancestors had eaten...”

At the risk of being very personal, I can give to you what I feel is the power of this moment in the creation of the church. John is asking us to stand with those who met Jesus, or who heard someone who had been totally turned around by him. John was asking us to face that deep moment when we either become disciples, or hold back yet again. Reading these passages carries us through that experience at a depth that shapes the rest of our lives, either happening in one minute, or in a repeat performance than goes on through the rest of our lives.

In the case of Marcia and me, I’ve always had the sense that we both were poised on the future of our marriage, and in our case it was a moment of closure we were living, for the rest of our lives.

So today, in that vulnerability of sharing my own private experience, I ask that God may work among us and ask, and accept our answer, to the offer John was presenting in this story of bread and manna and other powerful symbols we deal with as members of the body of Jesus.

Moving back to the saga of Israel’s first great royal figure, David, with his foibles and gifts, I ask that you, with me, reflect on what it means to give individuals political power, and for them to take it on. At this moment in our lives as Americans, it is tough to have a leader and tough to be one, and I offer to you my mixed feelings about it. Last Sunday we talked about January 6 of this year; this Sunday we talk about the darkness of David’s skills and liabilities. Surely, just as the challenge in John’s emphasis on bread and divine gifts calls us to new commitment to the Holy Spirit in daily politics, so David and Absalom require us to do better with power on our watch than we have ever thought of doing. Almost every day I read this is a time of increasing

abuse and greater demagoguery worldwide. We know that's how human societies often deal with big changes, either positive or negative. It's also a time ... like the era of our country's early development, or the time of Jesus, for example, when Rome was better organized for a moment and hence more horribly abusive, than much of the world has usually been.

"Working on it..." is a phrase that kills my soul, even as it teaches me how sorrow and brokenness have broadened my reach and Marcia's as well;

"Working on it..." is also a call to us to do more than we've ever thought of doing to bring harmony among divided spirits, to stoop and pick up the fallen pieces of how things used to work and make something new and beneficial for the future.. Marcia and I have lived intriguing, constructive lives following our divorce, and our three sons are doing so now in their turn, without divorcing, thanks be to God.

"Working on it..." also challenges us to face how shallow and incomplete our technological approach to everything is, from medicine to education, and from food to the diversity of spiritual gifts. God is much bigger in nature than we've been thinking for the last hundred years or so. God is much more attached to the relationship between us and the animal kingdom than we've acted like, with our hideous experiments and denials of our own similarities of instinct and birth and sickness and dying and growth. God is much more open to variety and equality than we've pretended for the last couple of centuries. Think of how much healthier we could be by now if, instead of capturing territory and controlling fellow humans, we had focused on bringing everyone forward while preserving the rain forests and the joy and variety of native societies .... The list goes on.

The call is more and more obvious as things play out presently. The compassionate relationship between us and the rest of creation is more needed than ever, and the compassionate nature of the God of all things is more necessary to accept. Like Jesus with the bread and the water and the manna and the crowds desperate to receive healing, we see the absolute practicality of worshipping THAT sort of God, that Creator and Redeemer, whom we know and are learning to emulate as members of his risen body.

Amen.