

Sermon for 5 September 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost/Labor Day Sunday

Scriptures: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

« **We don't do that.** «

Being a child of older parents, I got some reflections about THEIR childhoods. One was from my mother, who said all the houses on her street had fences because the streets weren't paved or given sidewalks, and so one day she was sitting on their front gatepost when a little neighbor girl came by, and Mom reached out and hit her ...."and then it just came to me, "We don't do that.!"

That story came to me when I read the Gospel lesson for today. Along his route as a young evangelist, Jesus learned some lessons, like everyone else. This non-Jewish woman stood her ground with him, and he responded with a new attitude. "She turned me around," as the old fellow said.

Put so naturally, and plainly, I hear a call to justice and equality like the ones we're still grappling with. It just came to me this summer that that wonderful statue of George Washington in Mount Vernon Square ... much nicer, my oldest son says, than the one in D.C. --- was saying something to native Americans very different than we've thought of until this summer and last year. Someone quoted an Indian leader a few years after Washington defeated native rebellion in the 1760;s, who said "Washington wasn't our friend. He destroyed our villages, impoverished our women ..." and it's true that the French and Indian War was no friend to native America.

On this Labor Day Week-End, we have plenty to learn besides what we grew up with or still even acknowledge. Union organizing still has to be done and redone again and again in our day, just as it had to be initiated in my grandfather's generation. Speaking of that, I remember another striking story my Mom told. She said the first time she became conscious of her dad's alcoholism she was about 4 or 5 and was walking down the street with him holding his hand, when she realized that he was weaving as he walked. Imagine what that said to a young child, and what it meant to her whole growing up! There are so many sides to family life, aren't there? So much influence comes down through the generations.

It seems to me this is a great moment for us to give thanks for fresh insights never held in common the way we are being called to hold them currently. "We don't do that." "Papa, you're weaving..."

"We don't do that." How do we develop a conscience? I watch it happening every day in Baltimore, where I committed to live and work in the 1960's, and where year after year, decade after decade, I've had some sense of making a difference, adding a little stability, taking a little risk, being part of a larger achievement than anybody fully thought much about, except that there was that feeling, "We don't do that," when certain issues came up and choices had to be made; and when I had to recognize that more than just being open-minded was called for, as

my sons went to school, and all sorts of other things happened. "Papa, you're weaving." I don't know if Mom even said that, and I know I tried not to think too much about relationships and consequences as the years have gone by.

"We don't do that." Scripture grows up, just like we do. Jesus was human... and there's no way he could miss being educated about compassion and equality and fair play as he grew and spoke and connected. Over and over I find myself re-interpreting Bible teachings as time passes. I shake my head at this abortion issue down in Texas right now ... and I know how defensive I can get about most anything @ a moment's notice, in the car, @ the bank, even on the phone with my sons, to say nothing of my divorced ex-wife ... and me...

Lots of opportunities to grow, and grow up, and speak new truth, and speak in love and truth at one and the same time ... lots come our ways, don't they? It's not just a hard time: It's a thrilling time, isn't it? That's what this little, tough story about Jesus and the foreign woman with a sick child, and his response ... and then hers ... and then his... says: This is the occasion to bless, and be blessed ... to face more than we ever did before ... "We don't do this."

Where did my Mom get that? What else is there to say? The Supreme Court isn't done with the issue, we know. God, they need our prayers! Boy, if we're not praying about this, and taking a stand, and doing it in love, where are we? James can jump down our throats in a second, can't he? Scripture isn't always helpful. We have to use it gingerly.

Let us pray: God, thanks that we know as much about good behavior as we do. Thanks that the Word gets through, even as your love overwhelms us. Let us be a "more perfect union," this Labor Day and all days. Help our great land grow better at representing people of all sides, and changing when that's called for, and re-doing our arrangements and yes, our very laws, our Constitution even, as our ancestors before us learned to amend and restate it...and without war this time, Jesus, please without any more war.

We love you. We love ourselves. We love our neighbors.

Through your Spirit we say once again, Amen.