

Sermon for 3 July 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore  
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost/Independence Sunday  
Scriptures: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30 (UM762); Galatians 6: 1-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

***“Traveling mercies”***

More to preach than any other Fourth of July I can ever remember!

Supreme Court gone haywire; guns available to everybody; dreadful abuse of Presidential power in this week’s committee hearings on January 6 2021; more money spent for war in Europe than since WWII; worse political division in U.S. than since the Civil War.

Take a deep breath. Let it out. Take another. Close your eyes. Now let the breath out, breathe normally, and open your eyes again.

This is our heart. We love America. The great New England preacher, Phillips Brooks, commented somewhere that Jesus surely loved his native land, just as the Bible specifies how important a homeland, real geographic space, was to Jahweh’s people.

I ask you now to consider: What if we in America are entering a new phase of territorial reality? What if the beauty of all our blended heritage, the hope we’ve represented to so many people, the ability to come back together after awesome divisions in a civil war, and the freedom to see and express and examine our deep flaws and grave mistakes, have expanded our destiny into one that is new on the face of the earth? What if the top-dog status we’ve experienced for generations is capable of altering into a less competitive mindset than history has yet produced? What if there is an unlimited future for us, more influential in its core values than those of any empire so far, not by our military dominance, or our financial wealth, but by America’s humane standards and its capacity to negotiate and sponsor negotiations, instead of to fight to the death?

I’m calling us to question these songs and pledges, these laws and customs, we’ve already learned to celebrate on July 4, every one of us, for all our lifetimes and those of our parents and grandparents. Ask ourselves how God speaks and empowers us less and less as the world’s strongest political power, and more as the model, the shaper, of tolerance and enlargement of opportunity, as benefactor and healer and example. Not because we’re Christian, but because we contribute to the larger miracle God is working not just in the U.S., and not just in one faith, but in all the great faiths working in sequence, along with some new religious communities we’re not even yet aware of.

It's really kind of simple. Scripture's full of it. Love your neighbor as yourself. Stick with what you know is right. Don't hold up yourself as hero, but be as modest as a little child in the time of Jesus, when children had no rights and very little protection. Be willing to learn ....remember the widow who talked back about the dogs surely licking up crumbs when Jesus refused to feed her bread?

Look at today's texts. Elisha refused to show off healing skills of his own. "Just go wash," and there the power of modest resources showed itself full in the general's healthy flesh. See Psalm 30 reminding us of rescue, but never denying the tough stuff God sends or our need to cry out and to endure and to beg for help along life's way. See Paul pull the rug out from under any competitiveness among members of the the local unit, the fellowship we know better than family, over and over. He holds himself up as a failure at anything but the one power in all the world and all the universes, the Center no one controls, the Spirit within and above and below and between and surrounding everything, that we train for here in the congregation, practicing together on and with one with another week by week as we return from world-shifting in our tiny tasks of making a better universe that we call "making a living."

Watch Jesus telling the disciples, "All you get is traveling mercies along the way. No absolute victories, plenty of set-backs and turn-arounds. You are useful, yes. Everybody can be. That's only second-level fact. Celebrate being adored, chosen, permanently enveloped in beauty beyond imagination. You're there. You are already there. I watched you. I love you. I need you. Amen.

Today we salute the flag and celebrate the history. That's important; but we're onto more than that. We know how shallow and shameful our blending of religion and colonizing has been. We know we ain't seen nothin' yet. Puritans who hunted witches and hanged native Americans; political rebels spouting pious phrases in order to cross the Delaware in the dead of winter. Huge baronial estates that kept the tired and poor from a decent share in health and wealth and basic education and child care. The backside of our progressive achievements is clearer with every political step forward. But we know enough to grow; and as Christians, we see enough to be enticed by the beauty of a better world for all. It's in our genes. The presence of our Leader keeps us on point. So let us pray for beautiful America even as we bow before its failings. We are part of the solution. Amen, indeed. Traveling mercies on a victory journey. Amen.