

14 August 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Org

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19 (*Insert, alternate leader/people*); Hebrews 11:22-12:2; Luke 12:19-56

“Fierce faith”

I was ten years younger than my nearest sibling. Really a different generation, he and our even older brother, who left for college when I was three.

Neither of them had much to do with me. Dave, the ten-years-older one, got into the Naval Academy when I was seven... The first time I remember his treating me nice was on Christmas vacation, that year, when we met him at the train and he was carrying a board game that ended up under the Christmas tree for me.

I thought of that when I read the other day a reflection by a journalist on how long it took him to break free of the “socialization” of being a Vietnam veteran. He said “we were all trained to believe in America’s rightness, and it took maybe twenty years to see more of the full picture.”

I bring this up because my brother’s gift, and his whole attitude of thoughtfulness for me, came after his training @ Annapolis.

I know this is a long stretch, but thinking of Jesus in today’s lesson brought me around to the whole matter of young people and religion.

Luke, the kind-hearted physician, steps out of character in today’s Gospel lesson. Listen to him quoting Jesus: “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three...”

You can see all kinds of potential there for going to war, claiming territory, asserting control. What I was grasping this time around in the three-year lectionary cycle and its focus on Luke, was how I felt in my bones what it was to have an older brother who was just grown up, and how being a “plebe” at the U.S. Naval Academy both civilized him and indoctrinated him, so that what felt to me like Christian kindness in a recently domineering older brother was just part of the picture of being a human being Both for Dave, the newly-kind older brother, and for me, the awed but still remembering little kid brother.

I could go on with autobiography. My brother made a fine officer, father, citizen. He had his flaws, and I've never willingly accepted his suicide @ 75, leaving a great deal of sadness for many of us to deal with ... but the larger point for today, as I'm striving to put it to us, is that we Christians don't simplify religion by making our founder human. Whether Luke meant what I'm getting at or not, his description of the still-youthful Jesus leaves us with its own unfinished business, its unique unanswered questions, among the great world religions. To see God in Jesus gives us the opportunity to cover up a lot of weakness in ourselves, even as it enables us to grow uniquely as images of God the Almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth.

The Jews were coming to terms with the same issues in Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea, as we've seen on recent Sundays. How could they be a nation and wrestle with all the foibles of politics, all the facts of power and control over others and each other?

In our case, we're bleeding mercy and jealousy all over the place this summer, with Ukraine dying before our eyes and screaming, "Do something!" even as this very week we stand by watching that fire in Cuba while other countries come to the aid of Cuban shores no closer to them than Cuba's shores are to us, and prate about "keeping a close watch on events" in a deeply hypocritical first response.

All that plays out this season in the racism and sexism that penetrate to the deepest roots of our own nationhood. We can't handle a squeegee crisis, or a gun-death between a seven-year-old relative of a security guard and a totally unrelated 15-year-old teen-aged neighbor, without race and sex shadowing any judgment or any long-term plan for healing. How am I going to guide that young woman's grieving parents if they want to follow Jesus? And as far as that goes, what does national defense have to say about the Holy Spirit and the Way of the Cross when Nancy Pelosi exercises her civic prerogative to visit China's version of Cuba and express her disgust at globally-obvious abuse of governmental authority all over Chinese military and civic life?

There's a shriek buried in every great faith walk. Life is hard, and business is lying unfinished all over the place. Forgiveness is a mystery, and until I realize it's not that I was right, but that my position was never the whole issue, that puts the full color into all pictures. You come to me with a problem, and I may be a well-trained judge, but even if I give good advice or negotiate a fair verdict, that's only the beginning of the fresh story we're all dealing with, day by day and soul by soul.

To believe ... to dedicate our lives, to the trust in good outcomes, is the most beautiful thing in the world. All other choices fall to the ground next to this one. Week by week and decade by decade, many of us have lived this out.

Today I understand a little more about my brother Dave than I did before I read this bit of Luke's gospel to get ready to say a word to you this Sunday. That means I understand a little more about myself, see a kind of basic bit of my own upbringing and outlook for the first time. Little brothers are still little brothers, even if they're sometimes treated better than they once were.

Same goes for Joe Biden. Same goes for Donald Trump. Same goes for Jesus Christ.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy. AMEN