

Sermon for 28 August 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalter (*Insert: alternate leader and **people***)

Psalms 81:1, 10-16;

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

“Guidelines”

I’m very grateful to have these weekly opportunities to expose and explore my grasp of the Christian faith.

That’s not to say I relax about it ...After all these years, exposing myself theologically still scares me, and I dread the thought that I might make believing more difficult for you.

But just as I’ve found life to be both full of opportunities to share things and work together, I’ve found it more independent and separate than I either intended or planned.

I walk alone a lot. That means I talk a lot to God. I remember telling my grandmother I’d sat and talked to God the night before, and it felt very natural. I was, maybe thirteen at the time. She was the most clearly religious of our family, and I was disappointed that she didn’t say anything; she just listened, and maybe smiled a little. Later on, when I was in seminary and began serving three little country churches about an hour and a half’s drive from my parents’ home, I can remember the look on my Mom’s face as she watched me preach one Sunday when they drove over and attended. It was kind of, “Aren’t you saying more than you can really support?” I never spoke to either her or her mother, who was the grandmother I mentioned earlier, about what they thought of my preaching; but if I was looking for affirmation, I didn’t get it there and then.

The ground I’m preparing here is, I realize, very personal; but my purpose is to allow all of us to hear the Word, and say the Word, and live the Word, as personally as possible.

Then I can ask all of us, “What the heck does Jesus mean about inviting people who can’t invite us back or ... as I think he implies ... even make us feel comfortable?”

Isn’t this another of those times when the church either paints him too pushy? How do we hear, not only that he ate out a lot, but that he wasn’t stuck up, but got along well with all kinds, especially what many would call riff-raff? Or, we paint him as too perfect? I want friends at my dinner-table. I want pleasure when I relax. That’s what time off is for!

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

Then you get down to this alone stuff. In my experience, it takes hundreds of hours alone to learn some of the most important things. Not just practice makes perfect. Reflection. What it means to be considerate. How to listen.

Do we really mean God loves us? Is this whole business of living and dying transformative?

My son who's an atheist agrees that the only way to get somewhere with your life, to have peace and be decent, is to act like things are going to turn out for the better, and to believe that as much as you can.

It's an exchange. Always, it's a contract, a deal, a covenant, between us and heaven. You work hard at relieving suffering, and I'll work hard at relieving suffering.

How many times have I told God I just can't handle this, or do that.....and then found myself doing just that, or maybe finding it done for me during the night, or while I was working on something else?

You gotta believe.. Church says that over and over ... and plenty of times, It's make-do and by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin, among the brothers and sisters who've been baptized and walk the walk ...and somehow we do a lot of good. Matthew Fox says a lot of this anger and meanness these days is due to grief. Things just aren't turning out the way they should. You can be angry a long time when you're sad, and facing up to sadness is labor! Both whites and Blacks need a lot of time to grieve before they can learn more about loving one another and themselves. It's a big lesson for this country, one lots of other countries have only learned by the long and hard way before us, sometimes with a lot more bloodshed than we, hard as that is to believe.

All I can say, after all this time, all these years preaching, all these years relating to church members like they mattered, and as though I mattered to them, is that the one who needs something feeds me, the text I finally find helpful was written by somebody who lived through the dark night, walked the walk, felt the Spirit after saying she couldn't, or he wouldn't ... All these guidelines have to be explored before they make sense, comfort doesn't come my way, but the Lord's way.

Trust and obey. Be brave, we are not here to play. Courage, brother, do not stumble; trust in God and do the right. How many ways can we say it? Love is everywhere. The center holds. God saw everything, and it was good.

Amen.