

Sermon for 4 September 2022@ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost/Labor Day Sunday
Scripture: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm *(Insert)*139:1-6, 13-18; Philemon 1-22;
Luke 14:25-33

“ *Traveling light* “

I can't begin without turning to God in prayer. Dear God, we worship you today in the darkness of the recent shooting death of a student at nearby Mergenthaler Vocational High School on campus, presumably by another student. We pray all the time about violence, but this is so close, so pitiful, so enraging, so frightening that we can't turn to your Spirit within and among ourselves without beginning with a lament, to beg for mercy, and to ask your movement within ourselves and our fellowship to administer aid and, in your good time, to build prevention for such tragic acts among us. Amen.

Then, we face immediately the reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, and acknowledge that he and those who added to his story faced times as turbulent and frightening as ours, in the eyes of the people of that day. Twice the people of Israel have been overwhelmed by the Babylonians, their leaders dragged off into captivity. Even worse, Jeremiah saw and confronted his fellow citizens with their duplicity in what was happening. The image of the potter and the clay was his way of hammering home insights, just as we are hammering home insights about things that our time and our civic arrangements led up to, and still expand, the violence in our midst. God is confronting us with a trend towards autocracy, with an opposition towards facing up to past failures in workers' rights and interracial justice, so that this Labor Day weekend is more poignant than it's been in many years. We tremble with the truth of the potter and the clay: That God really can dismantle our affairs and start a new direction we can't yet either see or trust ... and we in the household of faith find ourselves telling truths like Jeremiah that make most people uncomfortable and challenge our friendships, it seems, almost daily.

Second, Psalm 139 quickly leads us to the center of real prayer, where we face the piercing awareness of how well God knows us. There is no running from the all-seeing eye of our Maker. Help us, let us help each other, face awareness that healing looks at the center of situations. Renewal starts with foundation-work. Honesty begins at home.

The beautiful little Letter to Philemon gives a portrait of the elderly teacher and church-planter, Paul, loving both the slave-owner Philemon and the runaway slave Onesimus, asking that they be reunited as fellow believers in the household of faith. Contrary to our day, when Christians stand firmly on the side of all that dismantles inequality in society, this letter doesn't even ask that Onesimus be freed, but simply that Philemon share the equality that Christian fellowship produces, regardless of rank or worldly power. Thus we

are reminded that there is never a place for true discipleship without humility, as Jesus' washing the disciples' feet on Good Friday so emphatically demonstrated.

Finally, we come to a mix of metaphors and examples about following Jesus. It's clear Jesus is reminding us all that he's headed towards the cross and so, therefore, must we be.

The commentary is emphatic in insisting that "to hate" is the translation of a Semitic way of expressing detachment. To quote, "Hating one's own life is not a call to self-loathing, to throw one's body across the doorway and beg the world to trample on it as though it were a doormat. Paul labeled as valueless such 'self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body'(Col. 2:23). Rather, what Jesus is calling for is that those who follow him understand that loyalty to him can and will create tensions within the self and between oneself and those one loves; and in such a conflict of loyalties, he requires primary allegiance."

The two last parables focus on cost, and ability and willingness to pay. Again quoting commentator Fred Craddock, "For prospective disciples, the willingness to make full commitment is the one needed resource. Without that, all other resources are insufficient."

Which gets us to my point for today. I'm speaking personally. I walk around the Inner Harbor for a couple of miles most Saturday mornings. Usually the rest of the group I walk with are runners, and I walk alone. I tried something new yesterday that I found helpful. Instead of thinking of whatever came into my mind, I spent the whole time repeating, silently, the Lord's Prayer. I was amazed at how refreshed I was at the walk's end. Even though I've often felt I solved some problem by letting my thoughts range, this time I tied into the great insight of psychology and religious experience, that our minds are not our best guides when we want depth and refreshment. Ritual is. By "Traveling light," I mean turning loose, letting go, of plans and feelings and viewpoints and problems - all those things that take over our bodies and souls most of the time. Those get 'way too much attention in the modern, Western world. To walk with Jesus, to honor God's marvelous invitation to grow up into his likeness, is to turn loose everything else.

It's a life work. It's why we come together for this hour every Sunday. It's heaven on earth. It's the start of something incredibly precious that, as we promise one another through God's incredible, trustworthy, permanent presence, beats everything else.

Travel light. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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