

Sermon for 30 July 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b(*Insert: Alternate Leader, People*); Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

"I wish I understood..."

I keep a journal.

The other day, I found myself writing, "I'm not so much planning what to do, as spelling out what I need the Lord to explain."

Let me put that another way. The Lord doesn't need my advice. He needs my attention.

Why does he tell me a story about family trickery? Jacob tricks Esau out of his birthright. Later on you'll see Jacob tricking Laban out of the best of his herd of sheep.

I wish I knew.

Why did he pick one family to make a covenant with, anyway? Does that mean you have to start small if you want to get anything important done? I wish I knew.

And then there's Paul, the apostle. First person we know of to put something in writing about Jesus. Our best scholars have decided ... intelligently guessed... that we have letters from him written as early as fifteen years after Jesus' crucifixion. He says some things that move me incredibly. Look at that first sentence in today's reading: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." I haven't found a better explanation of prayer than that. I think I pray. I *know* I pray; just like I knew my mom, or my grandmother, or sometimes my dad, knelt at my bedside and said with me, "Now, I lay me down to sleep/I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep..." and my big brother, who never was much of a churchgoer until his last illness in his seventies, said he could always pray. But how did that get started? I wish I knew.

Then there's that string of parables Jesus rolls out today, about the kingdom of heaven ... We relate that, in contemporary language, to "Reality," what really matters, what's true They mean something, and yet we never quite finish with them... What was he getting at, ultimately?

I wish I knew. They've helped me all my life; but they've not answered a lot of my questions.

Often, some scripture I read for my devotions seems tailor-made for the question, or the worry, I've been trying to describe in my journal. But then I'm back where I started at the beginning. I have an idea of the direction I need to look as I face the day ... and sometimes I get a clear idea of what I want to say, or do, in the situation I expect to face. More often it's just a kind of

feeling, an attitude of observation, or a keener acceptance of my own feelings. But I still say, "I wish I knew."

Do you know what I'm saying?

Maybe I'm asking us to try not to control so much. Maybe that's the Gospel news, always.

Maybe it relates to everything that matters. Global warming. A 31-million-dollar item for a new nuclear defense weapon in the Congressional budget; or the fact that the squeegee kid was tried under our state laws as an adult.... The Baltimore Sun paper says only juveniles receive sentences focused on rehabilitation rather than ... what's the other word? I can't recall it.

In the name of our Lord, Jesus, God's reality among us, may we pull back on our wish to control so much! May we go to our prayer more to serve than to manage. May we hope for the one thing in our situations to be love and leave it to the Lord to bend things that way.

I wish I understood, but that's not the promise.

The promise is that love is going to win.

Help me to pray, and hope, in that direction.

Amen.