

Sermon: Pentecost 13

The Rev. Mike Wernick

September 3, 2017

Year A

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalms 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

Jeremiah laments... but not as an individual pouring out his personal feelings... he is a mourner crying out on behalf of... and for... Jerusalem... whom Yahweh allowed the Babylonians to destroy... what he writes... he writes in the first person... but it is meant corporately... for the entire community... why is our pain unceasing... our wounds incurable... refusing to be healed... truly... you are to us like a deceitful brook... like waters that fail... you look like an inviting stream... but there is death beneath your surface... the gut-wrenching emotion in these words almost takes your breath away...

And then Houston... and Beaumont... and the Gulf Coast... pick up Jeremiah's lament... you bring waters that do not cease... waters that breach levees... and riverbanks... waters that go where waters have no business going... flooding our infrastructure... our highways... our commerce... our neighborhoods... and our homes... destroying our lives... and every possession we have...

And like Jeremiah... the people of Texas turn their lament towards God... why have you let this happen... did you not promise to work with and for those who seek good and pursue it... why have you not protected... and prospered... and blessed our faithful work... what on Earth... God... are you waiting for...

Then Jeremiah is silent... and waits for God's reply... and instead of being defensive... instead of reacting with a defensive answer... the way some of us would... God calls for repentance... *If you turn back... I will take you back... and you shall stand before me... if you utter what is precious... and not what is worthless... you shall serve as my mouth...*

So what does turning back to God look like... what does it look like when the whole people turn back... it's one of those things we know more by it's pattern... than by its particulars... by its trend over time than by one specific event... it looks like the Gospel... like the life of Jesus... inviting... welcoming... caring for everyone...

There's a meme I saw on FaceBook... one of those sarcastic memes intended to put things in perspective... like the hyperbole that Jesus often used to make a point... it starts out in a threatening tone... that God will judge America over gay marriage... but then questions why God didn't judge American over the genocide of Native Americans... or over the kidnapping and enslavement and rape of Africans... or why God doesn't judge America now over not taking care of the needs of the homeless... the hungry... the sick... and the dying poor... so if God didn't judge us over that... same-gender marriage is unlikely to raise God's eyebrows...

There are consequences for the things we do... and for the things we don't do... in the physical and spiritual realm... what parent doesn't understand that their children bring things on themselves... but what parent... what God... would will those consequences if they could be avoided... children must learn from their mistakes and turn back... to civility... to responsibility... to adulthood... and so the question becomes... how do we focus what we learn individually... into what we decide to do corporately...

Amy Zeittlow... the pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Decatur, IL... dances in ballets... she wrote that at this time of year... companies begin to prepare for the demanding and complex ballet... The Nutcracker... she knows that the director will cast the show... and distribute extensive notation for each dance... she writes... I imagine a similar distribution process... in today's Gospel... Jesus hands out God's redemption choreography to the disciples... after Peter's impetuous confession that Jesus is the Messiah... perhaps Jesus thinks they are prepared for the challenge of this new dance... Jesus describes a persistent *adagio* he will perform... it leads to Jerusalem...

where the choreography will include trials both legal and physical... the cross... death... and ultimately an empty tomb...

While he will not leap off to Jerusalem yet... his words hold a promise that the tempo of this redemption dance will only increase in speed and intensity... his steps will not waiver... God has set the dance... and through Christ... God dances...

After setting his three-step combination of suffering... death... and resurrection... Jesus pauses... he looks to the cast of disciples... but the dance they were expecting is gone... they stare at the words on the page... unable to imagine what the living of them... will really look like... taking up their crosses and following Jesus falls far from their original vision of earthly success... in which they join Jesus in a triumphant jig of glory...

The steps required in Jesus' path of redemptive sacrifice sound awkward... ugly... too risky... even fatal... Peter takes the first step... pulling Jesus aside... he holds Jesus close while rebuking his proposed plans... Peter wants Jesus to dance to a different tempo... to a different end... the choreography of Jesus offends and will cause injury to the director and the dancers... their audience will not receive this dance with accolades and standing ovations... Peter knows the audience will boo... walk out... and protest this show... Jesus responds in turn... his eyes remain on Peter... his spotting point... but his body shifts... the movement of his arm pushes Peter behind him in order to dance without hindrance... Peter is focused on a human dance... Jesus on a divine one...

We expect professional ballet companies... and their lead dancers... to perform flawlessly... there is no place for stumbling in ballets like this... performers who miss a step... or stumble... will find new work... or will find careers ended... the same is mostly true across our society... there is little forgiveness...

We try not to stumble in our Christian walk... but we do... we can stumble over uneven pavement... like on our cover... but more often... we stumble over our resistance to change... we stumble over those things which were once held to be true but no longer are... we stumble over the trance of our family of origin... we stumble when we lack the courage to interrogate reality... we stumble when we don't think we deserve forgiveness... we stumble when we think we must hide our imperfections and mistakes from others... at almost any cost... we stumble when we are afraid of failing...

And so maybe to help ourselves feel better... we don't focus on Peter actually walking on water... but on having wavering faith and sinking... we don't focus on Peter accurately naming Jesus as Messiah... but on Jesus calling him Satan... we don't focus on our accomplishments... but mostly on our failures... and even Jesus stumbled... when he was called on the carpet by the Canaanite woman two weeks ago... for not seeing her as a worthy recipient of God's mercy... in the Garden when he threw himself on the ground and prayed... *Father... if it is possible... let this cup pass from me...* and on the cross when he lamented... *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* But Jesus also said... *Father forgive them... for they don't know what they're doing...*

Richard Rohr wrote... *If you are still inside the economy of merit—a quid pro quo universe—you will not understand forgiveness at all... in fact... you will find it abhorrent... forgiveness is not a popular or easy path... but some wise ones have shown us how... Desmond Tutu's "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" in South Africa exemplified the economy of grace after the fall of apartheid... everyone had to take proper and public responsibility for their mistakes... not for the sake of any punishment... but for the sake of truth and healing... in fact... the healing was the baring [b-a-r-i-n-g]... and the bearing [b-e-a-r-i-n-g] of the truth in public... you can't have community without accountability...*

We like to think that prayer will change God's mind about us... but prayer changes our minds about God... and shapes our behavior so that we more effectively embody God's

will... I continue to be convinced... that to God... almost all of our individual sins are like gnats that we brush away without even thinking about them... but our corporate sins bear heavier consequences... because the majority of us either assent to things like genocide and slavery... or we don't do enough to stop them... we say we want to protect air quality... but we don't elect those who support it as well... we say we're against child labor... but we buy cheap sweaters made in cheap sweat shops made by children... we say *God's Work Our Hands*... but then we stumble over all kinds of imaginary lines... lines we think we'd better not cross... like religion and politics... the bottom line and the environment... corporate greed and feeding the hungry... imaginary lines that push us at least to try to put God's Work back into God's Hands... and I can tell you... God has no hands...

Maybe Pastor Zeittlow was inspired by another kind of dance... the dance of the Holy Trinity... which dances amongst itself... but never stumbles... which respects each others' dignity... and is so enhanced by each others' love... that they experience themselves as One... so that the world may be One... all we have to do... is practice the steps...

Mike+