

Pentecost 19 (proper 22) St. Luke's, EG 8 & 10

***Kindle a flame of sacred love, O Lord, upon the altar of our hearts....***

In the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The first whiff I got of these lessons today on my *penultimate* Sunday of preaching at St. Luke's seemed to be a lot about tears. I could identify.

The Hebrew Scripture is all about the poetry of lament, the anguish of people who have suffered pain, loss and grief. The refrain of the psalm picks up this message as well, that of weeping over the losses of the people Israel as they suffer captivity in Babylon, remembering precious Zion, the city of faith that had sustained them but from which they now are separated.

As for our harps, we have hung them up as we sit down and weep by the waters of Babylon. How shall we sing the Lord's song upon an alien soil?

"Alien soil" is a great metaphor for wherever we may be when we feel separated by pain, grief or loss of any kind. **You know what that's about** and so do I, simply because we are human beings, and pain, grief and loss go with the territory.

A good part of our Scriptural heritage, and the message of the Gospel, is intended to help human beings cope with this eternal issue of separation: separation from others, from ourselves, from God, and the very ground of our being.

The very mission of the Church, if you look it up in the Prayer Book, is to reconcile us to God in Christ, and to the Ground of our being, SO THAT the world is a better place, according to the purposes of that holy God whom we come here, right now, to worship!

"Glory hallelujah!" perhaps our tears will be wiped away, at least temporarily until the next time, in such a way that brings us to **more faith** in the will and purpose of God being worked out in us at this very moment.

What is that wonderful hymn, a favorite of my former bishop, John Spong? He had it sung at every Diocesan Convention conclusion just to keep its message alive in us:

***God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year....***

***nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that will surely be,***

***when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.***

(Hymn 534: *Purpose*)

And Paul too is writing to Timothy thankful for the faith that has served **him** well in his own journey enabling him to be an effective young leader of the church. It sounds like a kind of valedictory, a wise direction for how to live a life of faithfulness.

Finally, we have the disciples appealing to Jesus: **“Give us MORE faith, O Lord,”** as if it’s a matter of quantity rather than quality. Thank God for those disciples, with whom we can so well identify in their **clueless-ness** as to what this business with God in Christ in our lives is all about!

God never demands MORE of us than God gives us. St. Thomas Aquinas is remembered as wisely counseling in that fashion, a kind of precursor, you might say, to a modern adaptation: “God fits the back for the burden!”

But that doesn’t go far ENOUGH in making the gospel point about grace and faith, being a sheer gift that we are given, if we can but be open to it.

That’s what we need heaps of, especially in times of loss and separation. I so identified with Paul’s words to Timothy that I read last week anticipating being home with all of you this week: ***I long to see you that I may be filled with joy!***

This “Leave Taking” which we are about to experience next Sunday seems in a very real way to me to be like a death. And what’s so counterintuitive, it’s a death I’ve chosen and can anticipate, and it’s not pretty. Of course, I realize, it’s just all about transition and change, which are always so hard for us human beings.

But the tears are justified nonetheless, and are probably why that particular theme first stood out for me in these lessons. I, like the psalmist, sit down and weep, when I think about being separated from all of you, as individuals and as a church community.

But then I hear the words of Jesus about that mustard seed, and having faith just maybe that little, so to help me trust and know that things will be just fine. I will be fine, and so will you, but the transition is hard.

The servants in the parable illustrate the message of Jesus: “Hey, we’re just doing our jobs here. Keep the faith. We’ve done what’s expected of us; the work is done. What we were told to do, we did.”

Man, that feels pretty good, so we can sing with the message of the hymns chosen for today the one we just sang for the Gradual, keep that fire burning in my heart, O Lord, or more poetically: ***Kindle a flame of sacred love upon the altar of my heart!***

That is my prayer for you and for me as we enter into this last week of mutual ministry together. Much work has been done; there’s more to come!

But with the gift of faith we have been granted, we are encouraged, in the same way Paul encourages Timothy, to persevere, even as he himself is in prison at the time of this writing. Paul says remember the faith of your grandmother, Lois, and your mother, Eunice. Think of that heritage of which you are a blessed inheritor, and take courage.

When I was a little boy, I remember my own grandmother, Alice, and the watch she wore with a tiny amulet attached to the band. You know what it was in that little glass circle? *A mustard seed.* It impressed me then that my granny wore this little symbol of her faith on her wrist as a constant reminder when she thought about it, I guess. Along with that BCP on her bedside table, and the picture of Christ over her bed, she gave evidence of the strength she depended on, not her own, but somehow conveyed to her when she needed to get through the travails of her life.

And my mother, Dorothy, with all her inclusive love for absolutely everybody, Jews, Germans, Italians, gays and lesbians, whom I came to know and love before I ever knew or had heard of those labels. Somehow, **she got the message** and lived it in such a way that I caught it too. And she wasn't a typical believer by a long shot, not a regular church goer except at the high holidays. She could really doll up in a big hat, gloves and carried herself like a dame. Picture Auntie Mame and you'll get it!

So, like Paul asks Timothy to do, remember your ancestors, your mom, your dad, for all their imperfections, how they've taught us and witnessed to us about life, and maybe about faith, and most importantly, about loving others as ourselves.

For faith is a gift; not our personal achievement, and we can **choose to receive this gift** or go on our way in another direction. Our president was quoted this week, Wednesday, did you catch it: "I choose to believe, because the way of Jesus seems a good one in terms of his carrying my sin and calling me to love and serve others." What an incredibly apt description of this path we here have chosen to follow.

Our depth of faith may seem small to us, yet Jesus promises that only a small amount of faith is enough. As in everything else, it isn't size that matters, but quality. I wish I acted in a way that shows I truly believe that. I still try awfully hard and wonder what it would be like simply to bask in this gift: maybe just sitting on a rock by the crashing waves trusting in that sign of eternity, appreciating the beauty and magnificence of that uplifting and nourishing scene; or looking at the moon overwhelmed by its beauty marveling in how it can just send you to bed for a good night's sleep; or sharing with a loved one, a soul mate, and simply being thankful for that unspeakable grace that has been given to you, like an unmerited gift prompting you to act with compassion and love on behalf of others to make the world a better place. Could it all be that simple?

Ask for faith, in all times of trial, separation, grief, or loss, and it will be given to you, as if it were a deep and rich movement of your very own soul, as you are open to that miraculous grace Jesus promises, **and embodies, in his own life**, and in the lives of all who receive him, and call upon his name.

*Kindle a flame of sacred love, O Lord, upon the altar of our hearts....*

Even right now, as we stand to say we believe....

