

AN OUTPOST OF THE REIGN OF GOD
PENTECOST 11 – PROPER 15 – AUGUST 16, 2020
BECKY ROBBINS-PENNIMAN
CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD, DUNEDIN, FL

Planet Earth has gone through a very weird spring of pandemic,
unfolding into a distressing summer of storms, heat, and economic collapse.

Here in the United States, on top of all that, the pressure cooker lid
containing the despair of centuries' of injustice and oppression
has been blown sky high, which is daunting enough,
but now we are layering on a campaign season
that already looks more like a bare-knuckle boxing tournament
than the quest of a civil society for principled leadership.

And in this little corner of paradise, some of you have told me,
the sun is hiding behind clouds of anxiety that are boiling up
as I enter the last two weeks serving you, the people of God, here in this place.

This is a great time to remember who we are at the Church of the Good Shepherd.

For 10 years, I've really given only one sermon:

the single purpose for this parish to even exist is for us to be an outpost of the Reign of God.

As a parish, we've set out our mission and vision very simply:

We Aspire to live in a world where all creation thrives in God's love.

*We Seek to to become who God created us to be by
worshipping joyfully, respecting all, sharing generously, and nurturing every spirit.*

We are a family, a clan, (for you Scots, a ceilidh), a body of people
made up of all sorts of folks, young and old, liberal and conservative,
male and female, energetic and tranquil, rich and poor, certain and doubtful,
afraid and confident, and everything and everyone in between.

Our mission is for each member of this body to worship their Creator with joy,
then use their God-given gifts to love each other –

and everyone else on Planet Earth – as Christ loved us,
thereby joining God's work of healing all Creation,

of living the fullness of the Reign of God right in the middle of a terrifying world.

No worldly problems or issues, no pandemic, economic difficulty, civil unrest, or political brawl,
is more real, more certain, than the Reign of God; no power is greater than God working through us
to be the Body of Christ in the world today, doing what Jesus did.

Is it sometimes hard to stay focused on what God is doing through us?

The answer has to be "YES" because today we hear

how even Jesus Christ, God with skin on, once had to get back in focus.

For the past few weeks, we've heard several great stories

where Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God coming on earth,

feeding thousands of people on a hillside,

and saving Peter when he was filled with doubt and fear.

After those stories, we skip over a couple, but I need to mention them.

When Jesus, Peter and everyone else on the boat weathered the storm and came on shore,
people flocked around Jesus – again.

This time Jesus healed all their diseases;

Matthew says "Everyone who touched him was cured." [Matt. 14:36]

While Jesus was doing God's work of healing the world,
 some Pharisees and Scribes showed up to argue with him
 about the absolute need to follow the rules of religion in order to be saved,
 to be acceptable to Almighty God, in this case, washing their hands correctly. [Matt. 15:1-20]
 Jesus makes it clear as a bell to these uber-observant holy folks
 that it's God who does the saving, the justifying, not because people are holy,
 or even because people are good, but because God is merciful and loving.
 God asks humanity to respond to divine mercy and love
 with their own mercy and love, not with hard-hearted legalistic rituals.
 By denying the Scribes' and Pharisees power to dictate whom God will save,
 Jesus makes powerful enemies who will soon find a way to Take. Him. Down.
 In short, Jesus is not only pretty exasperated with the lost sheep,
 the people of Israel, but now those lost sheep are acting like wolves.
 So Jesus and the disciples leave the crowds, and get back in their boat
 to sail across the lake again, this time into Gentile territory, into Canaan.
 Jews and Canaanites have a long history of detesting each other,
 so Jesus and the disciples assume they will be ignored
 and thus get a moment of peace and quiet.
 But, no. A pesky Canaanite woman sniffs Jesus out. She's heard about him.
 She actually believes the stories of "everyone" being healed.
 Her hope soars; she is desperate for Jesus the Healer to do one thing: Heal.
 For the sake of her miserable daughter, this Canaanite does something shocking:
 she, a Gentile woman, ventures out all alone
 to find this Jewish prophet traveling with a group of men.
 When she does, she does something else shocking:
 unlike the Jews he just left, she calls him by the highest title in Israel:
 Son of David. This is the title of the ultimate king, the Messiah of Israel.
 Jesus' identity is affirmed, not by his own people, but by a pesky foreign woman.
 Jesus does not respond to her at first; when he does, he actually insults her.
 He calls her a dog. That's not nice now, and it wasn't nice then, either.
 The Canaanite woman she doesn't escalate the situation, though.
 Instead of acting out of her own wounded ego,
 she stays focused like a laser on what she wants: healing for her daughter.
 She then joins the ranks of the truly faithful: people like Job, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah –
 all of whom had enough faith in God to argue with God, to struggle, to explore.
 The Canaanite woman enters into a vulnerable, honest dialog
 with Jesus, God with skin on, to find out just what God is about.
 She brings into the conversation the same prayer Peter prayed on the lake,
 a prayer of faith when all seems to be lost, and God is the only hope left:
 "Lord, help me." Do what you do, Lord: Save. Rescue. Heal my little girl.
 The woman's unshakable faith that God's could heal her daughter
 tied directly into the mission Jesus was giving his life to: God's project of healing all creation.
 The woman's amazing trust in him as God's presence in her life
 refocused Jesus as to why he was present there at all.
 His grief over the perverse obstinance of the Scribes and Pharisees is set aside for now,
 and he fulfills his main mission: to do what needs to be done for all Creation –
 including a pesky Gentile woman and her sick daughter –
 to thrive in God's love, we all need to be respected, nurtured: healed.

This isn't the first time in Matthew's gospel that Jesus has healed a Gentile, but after this incident with the pesky mother, his inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan to heal Creation increasingly becomes standard operating procedure.

Of course, this attitude, along with Jesus' many other challenges to the powerful people and institutions of his terrifying world ended with Jesus being executed by the state.

Yes, staying focused on the Reign of God can be dangerous.

It can cost us much to be a pesky voice challenging a hard-hearted world that demands conformity and loyalty to powerful institutions.

The courage to stay focused is not, primarily, an act of human will; it is the gift that comes from the revelation, also from God, that we are far more than what the world tells us we are.

Humanity belongs to God, to God's purpose, God's promise, God's life.

God's revelation is that we are invited to become one with God, one with all that God was and is and is to come in all creation.

The psalm describes it so beautifully: having our eyes open to see the glorious vision of all nations being glad together,

singing for joy together, people praising God with one voice together.

Thomas Merton, a holy and dedicated Trappist Monk, yet also very human, described his conversion from a sense of isolation, even as a holy monk, to being with all humanity in one house of prayer; he describes his moment:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness . . .

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . [It] was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes.

If only they could all see themselves as they really are:

a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate.

If only we could see each other that way all the time.

There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed . . .

[If] only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained.

There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.¹

Always remember why we gather here: here in this place

we are an outpost of the Reign of God, where all can come as they really are, no exceptions.

Here in this community we have been, are, and will continue to be

those who build a house of prayer for all people where all are welcome.

Thomas Merton said he couldn't explain it to people, but even if we don't understand completely, we can still practice.

In this outpost of the Reign of God we are to do our best

to live NOW in the fullness and vision of God's healing,

to practice looking at each person through God's eyes,

until we can see all the people walking around shining like the sun.

¹ Merton, Thomas. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Image Classic) (excerpts from pp. 153-155). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

COLLECT OF THE DAY

God of all peoples, your arms reach out to embrace all those who call upon you. Teach us as disciples of your Son to love the world with compassion and constancy, that your name may be known through the earth, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

ISAIAH 56: 1,6-8

The Lord says: Act justly and do what is righteous, because my salvation is coming soon, and my righteousness will be revealed. The immigrants who have joined me, serving me and loving my name, becoming my servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath without making it impure, and those who hold fast to my covenant: I will bring them to my holy mountain, and bring them joy in my house of prayer. I will accept their entirely burned offerings and sacrifices on my altar. My house will be known as a house of prayer for all peoples, says the Lord God, who gathers Israel's outcasts. I will gather still others to those I have already gathered..

PSALM 67

May God be merciful to us and bless us, show us the light of his countenance and come to us.

Let your ways be known upon earth, your saving health among all nations.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide all the nations upon earth.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

The earth has brought forth her increase; may God, our own God, give us his blessing.

May God give us his blessing, and may all the ends of the earth stand in awe of him.

ROMANS 4:6-12

In the same way, David also pronounces a blessing on the person to whom God credits righteousness apart from actions: *Happy are those whose actions outside the Law are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Happy are those whose sin isn't counted against them by the Lord.*

Is this state of happiness only for the circumcised or is it also for those who aren't circumcised? We say, "Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness." So how was it credited? When he was circumcised, or when he wasn't circumcised? In fact, it was credited while he still wasn't circumcised, not after he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that comes from the faith he had while he still wasn't circumcised. It happened this way so that Abraham could be the ancestor of all those people who aren't circumcised, who have faith in God, and so are counted as righteous. He could also be the ancestor of those circumcised people, who aren't only circumcised but who also walk in the path of faith, like our ancestor Abraham did while he wasn't circumcised.

MATTHEW 15:21-28

From there, Jesus went to the regions of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from those territories came out and shouted, "Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession."

But he didn't respond to her at all. His disciples came and urged him, "Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us."

Jesus replied, "I've been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel."

But she knelt before him and said, "Lord, help me."

He replied, "It is not good to take the children's bread and toss it to dogs."

She said, "Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters' table."

Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish." And right then her daughter was healed.

SERMON HYMN: All Are Welcome**BLESSING:**

Deep peace of the running wave to you.

Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.

Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the love of God to you.

The blessing of our Triune God, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit,
be upon you now and forever.