Preaching Notes

Pentecost 4.A.2014

**Old Testament Track: Learning about Discipleship from the First Families**

**Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67**

My father loves a good love story more than anything. He loves to tell us, his children and their spouses and his grandchildren, over and over again the miraculous story of how he met my mother, and how it was love at first sight, and of the lengths he went to in order to convince her that he was worthy of her love. Most of all he loves to remind us that love itself is a miracle. It is the miracle of all miracles. The thing about love, for my father, is that you can’t make it happen. But if it does happen to you, if you do happen to come across in this life a person whom you can truly love and who loves you in return, it is nothing short of miraculous. It is, for him, God’s ultimate gracious gift.

I don’t know if it was that kind of love that Rebekah and Isaac shared, but I can imagine from reading the details of the story it is just the sort of love story my father would tell over and over again. He would tell his children and his grandchildren about how, somehow, by chance, by a miraculous working of God, Abraham’s servant just happened to run into Rebekah on that fateful day in which he was searching for a mate for Abraham and Sarah’s only son.

Besides the miracle of love, a theme we might explore in this context as we consider the faith that has been passed on to us through the stories of the first families is the theme of radical trust. Abraham trusted God to work through his servant and bring Isaac a life partner with whom he would find joy and love and be able to build a family. Abraham’s servant trusted that if he prayed with faith, God would give him a specific sign that would enable him to identify the right woman for Isaac. Rebekah trusted that if she went with this servant she would meet and marry a man who with whom she could build a family and a happy and prosperous life.

After two weeks of horror stories from the first families in the Old Testament, today offers a respite. It gives us an opportunity to talk about a different dimension of the faith that we have received from our founding forebears. Love and trust! Those will preach!

If we were to summarize, then, what we have learned about faith from these first families over the first three weeks of our series, we might say that the story of Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael points to faith as a deep and abiding knowledge that God is with us and God hears our cries, even during the wilderness periods of life that inevitably come our way.

The story of Abraham nearing the point of sacrificing his son Isaac in response to God highlights for us that faith is difficult. There is no “easy button” we can push to make it all come together sometimes. Faith is less a state of mind than it is a state of relationship, and a life lived in relationship with others tests our loyalty and our commitment.

Even so, this week’s story shows us that although faith in God is often difficult, miraculous love happens! And developing a radical trust that God hears, God is with us, and God is faithful even when we are not can lead to a life filled with grace and joy and not just miraculous, but abounding love. It is this promise God makes to the prophet Jeremiah when, in the midst of a time of terrible struggle, God assures him, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

This does not mean it is the end of the struggles for our founding families. But it does mean that for them, like for all of us, in the journey of faith God always provides periods of sunshine when we are facing the storms of life. There are glimpses of hope, and the gift of love that is nothing short of miraculous. “And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13).

**Epistle Track: Discipleship 101 with the Romans**

**Romans 7:15-25a**

Of all the things that Paul wrote in the New Testament, these words are the ones I have quoted the most in my preaching career: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . I can will what is right but I cannot do it. . .for I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do!”

Boy oh boy, do I relate! And what a relief it is to hear a bit of honest self-revelation from Perfect Paul with his holier-than-thou, always slightly judgmental voice.

Two weeks ago I wrote about the twelve steps in AA and how, had Paul had them available he might have well made use of them as he taught the Romans about discipleship. I noted that for Paul, steps one and two were reversed. The first step was to accept the grace offered through Jesus Christ and recognized in Christian baptism. And last week I wrote that the second step was admitting you have a problem and repenting.

This week’s steps, then, might include four, five, six and seven:

1. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
2. Admitted to God, and to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
3. Were entirely ready to have God remove these defects of character.
4. Humbly asked Him (God) to remove our shortcomings.

Just as with the twelve steps, the sin is not entirely individual. There is a corporate dimension to sin in terms of our inheritance from Adam. Nevertheless, we are helpless to fight it on our own. We need a Savior! In the words of Shawnthea Monroe, “It is not that we are simply weak or lazy or not trying hard enough. There are forces at work in us with which we cannot contend. The will may be strong, but the flesh rules the day.” *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).

Furthermore, just as in AA, our battle is not unique; others share in the suffering and others can share in bringing the victory over it. Monroe suggests that many people may be reluctant to confess their sins because they imagine that they are the worst sinners in the room. But her point is that EVERYONE feels that way.

Paul’s words should be reassuring to us, because he is telling us flat out that the common denominator between us is that each one of us believes we are the worst sinner; even he struggles with that feeling!

As liberating as it may be to initially confess our sins and know God’s forgiveness (admitting we have a problem), even more so is there hope to be found in joining with others in the ongoing battle against our human inclination to sin. If there is comfort in knowing we are not alone in our struggles, there is also healing to be found in accountability. If we are all in this together, then perhaps our best hope is found in working on in community. And right there is where we can come back to the group dimension of AA, or in our own tradition, Covenant Discipleship groups!

After all, the whole purpose of group accountability is to help each other in fulfilling our journey towards loving more perfectly. Is that not exactly what John Wesley and the other members of the Holy Club were after? Is that not why they established the Methodist way? In order to journey together, to admit to one another that although each one of us has a problem, there is a greater success rate if we work on holiness in living together!

For more information on establishing Covenant Discipleship Groups or helping your congregation to learn more about Wesleyan Disciplship, I urge you to consult the resources of the GBOD at <http://www.gbod.org/leadership-resources/covenant-discipleship>, or write to Dr. Steve Manskar, smanskar@gbod.org.

**Gospel Track: Joining with Jesus and the Disciples in the Mission Field**

**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

Such beautiful words: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” These lines function at a number of levels. They are:

* Words of peace.
* Words of rest.
* Words that we turn to for comfort during times when life is hard.
* Words that speak loud and clear of the need to take a step back from the tendency overthink matters of faith.

But what was Jesus thinking about when he spoke these words? To whom was he speaking, and what was going on when he said this?

Since we’ve been following Matthew’s gospel over the last couple of weeks, we know that these words come as part of Jesus’ instructions to his disciples as he prepares to send them out into the mission field. He has said that they would be like sheep among wolves, and that he had come not to bring peace, but the sword, and that there would be risk, but that anyone who wasn’t willing to take up their own cross to follow him wasn’t really his disciple. Because following him would come at a cost: governors and kings would be after them, families would be divided, and great persecution would be endured.

This is what Jesus said he hoped his followers would do. But I guess must have hoped wrong, because if we read on, we find out that he went out alone from there to teach and preach in the cities.

And furthermore, it seems like his preaching and teaching did not receive rave reviews, because John the Baptist’s disciples came to ask him if he was the messiah, he responded by telling them to go and tell John that the blind had received sight, the lame walked, the lepers were cleansed, the deaf heard, the dead raised, the poor received the good news, and that anyone who had not been totally turned off by him had been blessed.

Let me reiterate, that this is what he *said*.

But then, all of the sudden, he turned around and began rail against everyone. He just let it all out: all of the discouragement and pent-up frustration that he must have been feeling.

First he ranted, then he raved, and finally, at the end, he prayed.

But to what will I compare this generation? Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes! But I tell you, on the day of judgment, they’re gong to get off easier than you. And you, Capernaum, what about you? And what about you, New Yorkers and Chicagoans and residents of Los Angeles! Woe to you! Do you really think you’re going to heaven? I tell you, you are all going to hell! If the miracles that happened here had taken place in Sodom, even that town would not have been destroyed, so I tell you, on the day of judgment, even Sodom will be better off than you!

After he wrestled with all of his frustration over the situation as he saw it, he prayed. “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding your truth and grace from these conniving, over-educated, so-called “intellectuals” and instead showing it to the simple-minded, open-hearted folks. Yes, for that is what pleased you.”

What kind of people followed Jesus? Well, all evidence suggests that it wasn’t the Jerusalem elites. His followers weren’t the movers and the shakers of the ancient world. They weren’t the politicians or the high priests or the executives or professors or the movie stars. They weren’t the well-educated or the upper crust.

They were simple folks: James and John, Andrew, Simon Peter. And outcasts: Matthew, the tax-collector, women, such as Mary Magdalene. In his moment of truth, Jesus thanked God for these people as he poured out his heart and soul. It was specifically to them that he issued this invitation: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

But what did he mean? Why would James and John and Andrew and Simon Peter and Matthew and Mary be weary and carrying heavy burdens?

Well, what burdened them, what grieved them deeply, was all of the scheming, conniving, clever, exhaustive ways that the lawyers and priests and politicians came up with to get around the law of God, to avoid doing right by people. The yoke of the Law—that’s what the Rabbis called it. It was the whole system that kept some people on top and most people on bottom.

The minds of those in power were always working and scheming, trying to figure out yet another complicated way to meet the legal requirements of the law without actually having to obey the Ten Commandments. The reason Jesus’ yoke was easy and his burden was light was because Jesus called on people to trust God and live by the law. Not just the *letter* of the law, but the *spirit* behind it.

In fact, Jesus asked his followers to stop trying to figure God out, to stop thinking about everything so much and instead, just surrender to the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “Don’t worry about what you’re going to say when they haul you in front of the judge. The Spirit of God will tell you what to say when the time comes.” To borrow a line from the Nike company a few years back, in essence, what Jesus was saying to his followers was “Just Do It.” Don’t spend all your time theorizing and theologizing and thinking and agonizing about God’s ways. Just Do It. Take the ways of grace and love into your heart and live them out as much as possible.

Nowhere is the effectiveness of Jesus’ insight more apparent than in the example of Simon Peter. When Jesus asked his disciples who people were saying that he was, it became clear that people didn’t get it. The religious leaders didn’t get it. The intellectuals didn’t get it. The academics and the philosophers didn’t get it.

So Jesus asked his own followers who they thought he was. And good old Simple Simon gave the right answer: “Why, you are the messiah. The Christ. The Son of the Living God.”

Jesus responded, “Blessings on you, Simon, the Rock. Flesh and blood philosophizing and thinking is not how you got to this. This truth was revealed to you by the Spirit of God. I tell you, Simon, you are a rock. And on this rock of simple faith I will build my church, and the powers of hell and death shall not prevail against it.”

How can we find rest in our souls? We all know that money can’t buy happiness. And furthermore, if people could just sit down and study and think long and hard in order to figure out how to be happy, then those professors up in all of those illustrious universities and seminaries would be laughing it up while those of a more “simple faith” continued to toil in misery. But everybody knows that that isn’t the way it works. The fact is, just the opposite is true. I would submit that it is the people of a more simple faith that are often the happiest people of all.

But what about the members of United Methodist congregations today? How are they to find true contentment and rest for their weary souls? Because the fact is, today’s members are generally not simple people, and the United Methodist Church is not a simple church.

Furthermore, we live in a very complicated world. A global village that is socially, culturally, technologically, spiritually, politically, environmentally, and economically connected. How is it even possible for us to find true happiness in such as time as this?

Perhaps it is not. Maybe it is harder than ever before. The more those who are rich in things ponder Jesus’ advice not to “lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth,” the less sense the Christian faith makes to them. And no matter how long and hard we think about it, we can never make come to terms with Jesus’ commandment that we love our enemies.

No, I’d say that not even the smartest, most well-educated person among us can figure the ways of God as Jesus taught. In fact, having finally completed a PhD this year, all I can think is how short a distance I have come, even after all these years of study. I keep asking myself, when it comes to matters of faith, where have all my smarts gotten me? It’s like that old saying, “sometimes I’m so smart I make myself sick.”

I have to confess that, even as fascinating as I find smart people to be, when it comes right down to it and I’m in trouble, the people I turn to are not necessarily the most highly educated people I know. No, the ones I run to when I’m burdened are those who have shown themselves to be steadfast and loving and wise enough to be gentle. If they happen also to be smart, that’s fine. But a sharp intellect is not the first priority I seek when I’m hurting.

How do we figure out in our minds how to find rest for our souls? Well, I think the point is that we’re not SUPPOSED to try and figure it all out. All we have to do is follow the way that Jesus has laid out for us. That may not be easy, but long ago it was figured out already for us. So it’s not something we have to figure. It is something God has already figured out for us. Our task is to trust in God. All we have to do is trust God. And when it comes down to it, it doesn’t matter how we manage to do that. What matters is that we just do it.