

Proper 18C
Pentecost 15

September 5, 2010 – Labor Day weekend
St. Andrew's

Jeremiah 18.1-11 [Deuteronomy 30.15-20]

Ps 139.1-6, 13-18 – psalm is read antiphonally by alternating sides of the congregation, with intentional pause between verses

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14.25-33

How about that psalm? There are many beautiful passages in the Bible, some of which take your breath away with their beauty. And then there are some like the gospel from Luke this morning, with its apparent admonition to hate your family if you're going to love Jesus, which take your breath away because of their shocking and perplexing nature. No matter the extreme or the middle, we often race through scripture so quickly that it has no chance to soak into us at all. We don't give it time to touch us, to change us, to transform us. So it's good to mix things up on occasion, like reading the psalm in a different and very intentional way. There is a "method" of biblical study that we spent some time with in a Lenten study a couple years ago, and the bible study group uses each Wednesday, called *Lectio Divina*. It is a means of scriptural reading which compels us to slow down, listen, chew, and respond to it.

Psalm 139 might be a good one for you this week to spend some time with and let it soak into you. Herb O'Driscoll, who will be our honored speaker and guest in two weeks, wrote that this psalm describes a moment when we feel that the gulf between the human and the divine has been bridged, and that our humanity is actually addressing God or being addressed by God. You should rush through that.

Ellen Armour believes that this psalm, by focusing on the goodness of embodied creation, offers a counterpoint to any tendency within Christianity to focus on souls rather than bodies. It places care for our physical as well as our spiritual needs squarely at the center of divine concern. In the face of being so fearfully and wonderfully made, our human voice may be able to express nothing more than utter humility, O'Driscoll continues. Perhaps, he writes, nothing else is possible when we stumble into the presence of God. There is nothing to do but to bow the head in awe. "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me" writes the psalmist.

It is always a challenge for me to discern if there is any intentional or unintentional connection between or among the readings for each Sunday. Sometimes it's clear and sometimes it would be artificially forced. So where do you go from "Lord you have searched me and known me?"

Herb O'Driscoll offers his "weavings" for these readings as being one of a God who reshapes: God as potter, shaping the community of faith, God who knits us together in the womb, God who establishes new relationships of reconciliation, and a life of discipleship which will demand a total remolding of our lives.

You can read lots of commentaries and spend hours in theological study and prayer, but I believe it is all summed up in the Old Testament reading we did NOT use this morning. It is the second set of readings that for the most part the Lutherans choose, but we do not. It's from Deuteronomy, chapter 30 and I won't read it to you, but God sets before the people a choice: life and prosperity or death and destruction; life or death; blessings or curses. The Lord says, "Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." Choose life.

There is a saying that every preacher only has two or three sermons in them, they just get said in different ways. This might be one of mine: Choose life. Fred Craddock writes in his commentary on these verses that all who reinterpret the biblical laws over time and who intend to obey the command to love only one God must work at learning and applying the meaning of that love. The rabbinical tradition developed a practical criterion for applying the law that stems from the theology of this passage. The law leads to life. If one interprets the law and finds that it leads to death, then that interpretation is wrong. If it is not of life, it is not of God.

Choosing life doesn't mean "easy." Being a disciple of Jesus isn't going to be easy. There may or will be divisions within families; we heard that a few weeks ago. The language of "hating" father and mother is strong and it's a little softer in Matthew's gospel. But the term in Greek speaks more of attitudes and action, not emotion. Craddock writes that it is a Semitic way of expressing detachment, a turning away from. It is not the emotion-filled word we experience. If that were the case, it would shatter all the calls to love, to understand, to forgive, to honor that we hear in both old and new testaments. What Jesus calls for is that those who follow him understand that this choice for life won't be tiptoeing through the tulips; when we have to choose, he requires our primary allegiance. When loyalties compete, Jesus is the way and he became our way through the water of baptism; his and ours.

In his beautiful letter to Philemon, [which is the entire book, 21 verses, 335 Greek words – we get them all today!] Paul asks the slave owner to take back the runaway slave, now as a Christian brother. We have thought all kinds of negative things about Paul and perhaps many of them are deserved when we stumble through his language about women not speaking in church or teaching men, and that our daily work doesn't count before God. But here, Paul is lovingly yet persuasively opting for a life-giving relationship and reconciliation. There are many who believe this little letter is about abolishing slavery, but the scholars think that is too superficial a reading because Paul doesn't ask that Onesimus be freed, but restored for love's sake. The central meaning and purpose of the Letter to Philemon concern the difference the transforming power of the gospel can make in the lives and relationships of believers. Paul's focus is on the power of the gospel to give life by transforming human relationships and bringing about reconciliation.

What is it that gives life when a Seattle police officer fires fatally at a man because he doesn't put down his whittling knife when commanded?

in an arson fire at the construction site of a mosque in Tennessee?

in fear-filled propaganda about the President's religion?

in British Petroleum's threat that they won't have enough money to do what they promised if Congress won't let them keep drilling in the Gulf?

"If one interprets [biblical law and finds that it leads to death [body, mind or spirit], then that interpretation is wrong."

We have choices every day between life and death, blessing and curse. In what we buy, where and how we shop, how we consume resources, how we use our time, talent, and treasure. God has put before us a choice, and we choose to be in or out of relationship with God by how we treat our neighbors, raise our children, welcome the stranger and forgive those who have done us harm.

God the potter shapes the nation and the community into a vessel that holds life. Our part is to choose to continue to be remade into that vessel, again and again, day by day, choice by choice, knit together and acting according to God's intention for our lives as individuals and as a people, recalling that each of us, even those with whom we most disagree, are fearfully and wonderfully made. Even as Jesus is on his way to the cross and tells us that to follow we must carry the cross with him, the way which appears to be to death, is ultimately the way we choose life.

Gail Wheatley+