

Sermon for Sunday 5 July 2020 @ Bethesda

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost/Independence Day Sunday

Scriptures: Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 43:10-17; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

*"I do not understand..."*

We're deep into "Ordinary Time" today, when the church feels free to suggest all sorts of biblical texts and themes because no central motif overpowers everything else in the liturgy.

Continuing with the central "who we are, how we got here" narrative that began with Abraham, we now follow Abraham's son, Isaac, as his aged father guides him into marriage. It is a good story, with a trustworthy ambassador, a beautiful and courageous bride, and a general message that God can be depended on to fulfill promises when people truly rely on the possibilities of life, and treat one another fairly.

The psalm celebrates a royal marriage, such as the Hebrews and other ancient peoples often arranged. We must remember that its very patriarchal character is not a divine model, but an historical fact: Marriage was often politically arranged, economically focused, and male-dominated in many cultures... but nevertheless bounded by covenant and capable of being blessed by God.

Then, in the scripture I focus on today, we're off and running with Paul, talking to the early church in perhaps his most influential letter, to the church at Rome. We're into the thick of it by now ... we can spend the rest of our lives backing up to this famous passage and backing off into the wide range of conclusions it will offer up ahead. It's never nailed down in its central point. Some interpreters think it's Paul the Jew describing himself trying to live true to Torah, God's law, and ultimately overwhelmed with the relief and joy of Christian conviction and dependence on God's grace alone. Others see this passage as Paul the converted Hebrew, still groaning with all nature in the pull towards new life one moment and the drag back towards unfaith, or still-emerging faithfulness and joy, that are so fundamental in the strongest saints as well as the newest, or weakest of the community of believers.

Either way, the "I do not understand" idea is so real to me, and I believe so helpful to our current moment of history, that I offer it to you and me as the jewel of our time together this week.

We're considering opening up the church building again for worship; but we know that's not simple. We're adapting, incredibly, towards uncertainty and change we didn't imagine ... and there are inspired moments and grand vistas in the future we can scarcely sit calmly considering ...but "I do not understand" is very, very clearly present in our mood, our meetings, our self-trust, our evaluation of others ...much more, if we think of people like Rebekah and Isaac, and that savvy and trustworthy family servant, in the first lesson for today, and certainly in those entering into marriage these days, or re-negotiating contracts as we are now with

those who share our building, extend or respond to our outreach through the internet, or try to plan for school or Christmas or ....

“I do not understand.” I want each of you to go home and, in your personal devotional time this coming week, study this chapter of Romans ... not expecting to get all the answers, but to allow the connections to guide some of your prayers. I believe it will be a valuable walk with the Lord...because you see, along with all the troubles .... Like the Irish speak of the long distress they lived through as citizens of Great Britain ...”the troubles” are our troubles right now over here .... And it’s not right or faithful just to expect or even work towards when all this gets straightened out. This is more powerful than that. Mississippi gave up its Confederate flag last week. We were supposed to split as a denomination by now. I am convinced that there is more opportunity for good change now ... as well as more danger of worldwide damage, as well as local meanness, than we’ve ever known. “I do not understand” is both a lament: How could the doomsday clock get so close to midnight this year? and a clarion call to say in a hundred ways, “Let’s see if we can’t rearrange this budget, or this institution, or this business model or energy-production method, in a little different way ... or a big way, and come out with better consequences for a whole lot more people, and the animals and bees and oceans as well.” We stole this country, and built it by slave labor. Stop hiding from that, and believe you can do something constructive in facing it ...

“I do not understand...” When you’re ready to bend and turn, to listen and to search for healing ... and to look for all the heroes involved in just that kind of thing already around us ... something like resurrection from the dead is possible.

I believe that. I don’t have time for less than that. I’m preaching that on this national holiday.

Go now, and live into that idea, this week. “I do not understand.” We don’t have to understand how we keep messing up. We have to go towards confession, and forgiveness, and new chances coming to us faster than we can even see yet. It’s not us. It’s God Almighty in the midst of creation, at work and alive on every side. “I do not understand...” Praise God, “I do not understand.”

Through Jesus Christ.

Amen.