

The 12th Sunday After Pentecost
Proper 14 – Year B
11 August 2024
St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos
Berkeley D. Johnson, III

May I speak in the Name of the Holy, Living, and Undivided Trinity, One God, now and forever,
Amen.

Good morning! It is a joy to be here with you and to worship here with you today. These
Ministry or Liturgy of the Word services have marked a special time in our parish life, and I'm
not saying or suggesting that we won't still have them from time to time going forward, but I
think it's fair to say that once we do finally have a new priest here with us, they likely will be
occurring less frequently.

When I looked at the lessons for this week, and thought about how I would approach them, I was
reminded of when I started coming to TEC thirty years ago in VT.

Most often, in the sermons I heard back then, the priest would talk a little bit about each of the
lessons, perhaps searching for a thread of continuity between them. But as the years went on,
more and more, I found that sermons became mostly focused on the Gospel lesson, and I have
adopted that style as well, often not even mentioning the other lessons.

So, as I spent time with the readings for this Sunday, I thought I would utilize that approach I
encountered when I first started coming to church as an adult, and touch on each one, sharing
what jumped out at me, and hopefully giving us something to ponder.

I remember how I would come to church, at that time it was St. Peter's in Bennington, VT, and
listen to the lessons, and try to figure out what was going on – what was the message or kernel I
was supposed to hear or glean from this reading?

And then there would be one like the first lesson we have today, from 2nd Samuel, and I would just have no idea.

I mean, you could read this one a hundred times, but unless you know the back story, the context, I don't know how you could make heads nor tails of it. Yes, the king loved his son, we get that, but what was going on? It's so confusing, at least to me...

Well it turns out, upon further investigation, that the king is David, and Absalom is his son who has rebelled, or risen up, against him, to the point that they are now going to war against each other!... and yet David still does not want his son harmed.

Now I can't speak for all parents, but I know so many, myself included, who have had struggles with their children; and yet, we love them, we want them to be ok, we certainly don't want any harm to come to them, and we find ourselves grieving deeply when something does.

So once I understood the context of the story, I thought it might be a reflection of the love that the Creator has for each of us, and the commentators I checked with agreed – so that's the good news: no matter how rebellious we ourselves might be, no matter how often or severely we might get it wrong, or end up opposed to, or even fighting against what God desires for us here on earth, we are still beloved. And that's an important point I will return to when I get to today's Gospel passage later.

So, Absalom dies; the king wails in his grief, and for me, at least, this leads us directly and naturally into Psalm 130: Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord. Hear my voice!

What a powerful lament! It's so interesting, the paradox of these lament passages. In my work as a hospice chaplain, I want my visits of course to be uplifting, and often they are, filled with laughter and gratitude, while tinged with sorrow and regret. But sometimes we then turn to

scriptural passages like this, and I used to wonder, is this helpful? Should I skip over what I perceive as the more difficult verses? And I would summon up the courage simply to ask my patient, “would it be better if I left that part out?”, and invariably they would say “no, no, leave it in; I need to hear that right now.”

Because they needed to know, on some level we need to hear, that others too have gone through what we’re going through. It brings comfort to know we’re not alone in our suffering, and that these verses were powerful enough that they were included in the canon that has been passed down to us through the centuries, because these words spoke to the hearts not only of the writer’s generation, but to subsequent generations, all the way down to our present day. And I think that’s pretty important to recognize.

So just remember, when you are down and feeling alone and inconsolable, there are verses here in our scriptures that remind us we are never truly alone; that our forebears went through difficult times, that there’s nothing new under the sun, and ultimately, that all will be well, all will be redeemed. More on that later as well.

Now onward to the Epistle reading from the Letter to the Church in Ephesus.

The line that jumps out at me here is “Be angry but do not sin...”

I thought about the things that make me angry: selfishness, greed, injustice, oppression. I don’t believe it is sinful to get angry about such things...*Jesus* got angry about such things, as I recall, and he was without sin!

So, again, I checked with the commentators, and they agreed that this type of righteous anger is not an affront to God; in fact, it is likely an important part, a necessary part, of our life in Christ, especially given our privileged place in this world. So I think we’re on the right track.

But what about the rest of that verse? “do not let the sun go down on your anger.”

I think, or fear, some have used this as a familial admonition that you shouldn't go to bed angry at your spouse or partner or children; but let's not domesticate it in that way – let's keep it connected to the righteous anger we just talked about.

What is the author of this letter telling us? My sense of it is that, yes, we need to work hard to combat those forces that would hurt, marginalize, or destroy any of God's beloveds, or God's beautiful creation; but at some point, when the sun goes down, we too must rest from our labors and let go of that anger.

And I imagine Jesus, with the disciples, out in those deserted places, at night, gathered around a fire, laughing, telling stories, relaxing...and being a community; letting go of the righteous fire burning within them, and setting it aside for the night.

I'm reminded of the line from the New Zealand Night Prayer: “It is night after a long day. What has been done has been done; what has not been done has not been done; let it be.

I often talk about needing to recharge my own inner, spiritual battery, for the work that lies ahead. I take time for concerts, as many of you know; I light the firepit, put on some jazz...I might even allow myself a cigar and a wee bit of scotch on occasion.

Now, I realize our friend Paul might have something to say about the scotch, and I know my doctor has something to say about the cigars, and yes, my cousins, God bless their hearts, like to give me a hard time about claiming to be on the side of the poor and the marginalized while sometimes enjoying some of the finer things in life... but I don't sense or feel God being too upset about the whole program.

So I would encourage you as well: fight hard, care deeply, love fiercely and boldly...but let go of it at some point before you go to bed; give yourself a chance to breathe and recharge; find those activities and people that rejuvenate your spirit, and make sure to spend some time tending to them as well, so that you can be at your best when needed.

And that leads us to the Gospel lesson and the I Am statements from Jesus.

I am the Bread of Life. I am the Living Bread that came down from Heaven.

You may have noticed I changed the wording of the Gospel when I read it because I believe “the leaders” more accurately describes Jesus’ opponents at the time, than the other term, which has become more problematic in our day and age.

And I may be wrong about that, and that was precisely my point earlier.

How can we know the cause for which we are fighting is just and true and in accord with God’s vision? How can we be sure that we’re not Absalom?

I don’t know that we can, but I do know this: we can gather here and in an act of faith, share in the one true Bread, the Living Bread, which has come down from heaven.

And in doing so, we share in the Body of Christ, and become the Body of Christ.

And I believe that is a big part of what differentiates us from other groups and organizations that may be fighting for what we believe to be the same, just causes with which we align ourselves.

We have placed Christ at the center – not our selves or our cause. We have put our trust, our faith, in Christ, and then have gone out to do the best we can in His name.

I remember being questioned early on about my hospice work by a close family member who didn’t understand how I could just go out and minister to and support nonbelievers, or people of

other faith traditions, and assure them that everything was going to be ok, without “telling them the truth.”

“Anybody can do that,” they said, dismissively. “Well, apparently you couldn’t,” I replied, “so not anybody,” but their point stuck with me.

And perhaps my response was a bit defensive and snarky, but intra-family squabbles can be like that. We certainly have an intra-family battle in the first lesson, and there are words of division in John which run pretty deep as well.

As for me, I am trying to do the best I can. I am trying to be as Christlike in my approach to being with people as I can, and my foundation for that is centered here, where we come together and gather to share in the Living Bread that came down from heaven.

Not a doctrine or dogma or belief, but an action, something that we do together. So that even if our other actions or beliefs are misguided, even if we get it wrong, we are reminded that Christ died for us, that we are beloved, we are forgiven, we are a part of each other, and that we are one Body, in Christ. And for that we can say, Thanks be to God. Amen.