

15th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: PROPER 18C

Jeremiah 18: 1-11

Psalm 139: 1-5, 12-17

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

SEPTEMBER 5, 2010

St. Matthew's Church

Chesterfield, VA

Ruth Partlow

Lord,
 It costs a lot
 to walk with you,
 carrying our cross,
 not clinging to anything, anyone.

Palaces,
 portfolios, chickens,
 clothes, cars, cows, books, favorite chairs.

Help us let go of them and more.

Give us yourself instead.

Be all we need.

Be our light,

our sun,

our moon,

our everything.

The Center for Liturgy, St. Louis University. Prayer Path for Luke 14:25-33

WHEN I PREACH ONE OF THINGS I LIKE TO DO IS FIND A CONNECTION AMONG THE VARIOUS READINGS. IT'S ALWAYS A CHALLENGE. SOMETIMES IT WORKS AND OTHER TIMES, IT DOES NOT. JUST AS WHEN I FINALLY SIT DOWN TO WRITE A SERMON SOMETIMES THE WORDS FLOW. OTHER TIMES THEY DO NOT. BUT TODAY I SEE FIND THERE IS A DEEP CONNECTION. EACH DESCRIBES WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FOLLOWER OF GOD –OF JESUS CHRIST. UNDERNEATH THERE IS AN ASSUMPTION OF OPENNESS AND WILLINGNESS TO BE MOLDED AND SHAPED, TO BE SERIOUS ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY IN WHICH WE ARE ENGAGED. IN EACH OF THE READINGS I FIND A CALL TO BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT HOW WE ARE FORMED INTO THE PERSON AND THE COMMUNITY GOD IS CALLING US TO BE. HOW DO WE DO THIS? HOW MIGHT GOD BE WORKING IN OUR LIVE? HOW ARE WE BEING SHAPED AND FORMED? ARE WE LETTING GOD BE OUR LIGHT, OUR SUN, OUR MOON, OUR EVERYTHING?

WHEN I BEGAN THIS SERMON AND TYPED IN TODAY'S DATE – SEPTEMBER 5 IT HIT ME. IT'S A DATE I'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER. IT'S THE BIRTHDAY OF OUR THIRD CHILD, A SON – SHAUN. HOW IRONIC THAT ON THE DAY I'M THINKING ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF CHRISTIAN FORMATION IT'S THE BIRTH OF THE ONE WHO SET ME ON THE ROAD TO DISCOVER WHO I AM IN JESUS CHRIST AND WHO GOD IS.

ALMOST 40 YEARS AGO ON SEPTEMBER 5,1971, I WASN'T SURE WHAT I BELIEVED OR EVEN IF I BELIEVED. AND IT CERTAINLY WAS NOT APPARENT THAT GOD WAS ABOUT TO MOLD AND SHAPE ME THROUGH SADNESS, LOSS AND TRAGEDY TO BE BECOME WHO I AM TODAY.

IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT, YET FORMATIVE TIMES OF MY LIFE. OUR THIRD CHILD WAS BORN THAT DAY WITH A CONGENITAL HEART DEFECT. HE LIVED ONLY A FEW WEEKS. AS YOU CAN IMAGINE, THE LOSS OF A CHILD, OF ANY LOVED ONE IS PAINFUL BEYOND IMAGINING. IT TOUCHED BOTH BOB AND ME DEEPLY.

HIS DEATH BECAME A PIVOTAL POINT IN MY LIFE AND IN BOB'S – OUR FAITH JOURNEYS WERE NEVER THE SAME. THE CHANGE DIDN'T HAPPEN OVERNIGHT BUT CAME THROUGH A LONG SLOW PROCESS – SOMETIMES PAINFUL, SAD, BUT IN THE END TREMENDOUS GROWTH. FAMILY, FRIENDS IN THE NAVY, OUR PARISH IN HAWAII SURROUNDED US AND NURTURED US DURING THOSE FIRST YEARS. AS I LOOK BACK IT THE WAS NURTURE AND TEACHING OF THE SEVERAL PARISHES WE WERE A PART OF IN THE 10YEARS FOLLOWING THAT WERE SIGNIFICANT IN HELPING US COPE WITH OUR LOSS.

WE WRESTLED WITH “HOW COULD A LOVING GOD DO THIS TO US?”. WE HAD DONE EVERYTHING RIGHT, FOLLOWED THE RULES, WORKED HARD, ATTENDED CHURCH AND YET TRAGEDY CAME. IT CAUSED US BOTH TO ASK ,” “WHY ME” AND

“WHO IS THIS GOD WHO CREATED US AND LOVES US?” LIKE JOB, WE THOUGHT WE’D DONE ALL THE RIGHT THINGS. YET OUR CHILD DIED.

THIS WAS A TIME WHEN GOD WORKED ME OVER LIKE THE POTTER WORKING THE CLAY. I WAS PULLED, PATTED, REFORMED – JUST AS WE HEARD IN JEREMIAH – DESCRIBING THE POTTER AT WORK – PULLING, PUSHING, STARTING OVER. IT WAS CHALLENGING, PUZZLING, AND SOMETIMES I JUST DIDN’T UNDERSTAND OR RECOGNIZE GOD AS OUR CREATOR AND REDEEMER.

PSALM 139 REMINDS US THAT GOD IS THERE AT OUR VERY BEGINNING AS WE ARE FORMED AND KNITTED TOGETHER IN THE WOMB. GOD IS WITH US IN THE BEGINNING – AND WILL BE WITH US THROUGHOUT OUR YEARS ON EARTH BE THEY LONG OR SHORT. THERE IS HOPE FOR LOVED ONES WHO HAVE DIED. PAUL WRITES IN ROMANS 8, NOTHING WILL EVER SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST. THESE WORDS ASSURE THAT OUR LITTLE SHAUN RESTS WITH GOD IN THE HEAVENLY PLACES. HE IS NOT FORGOTTEN.

PSALM 139 REMINDS ME THAT THERE IS NO PLACE THAT WE CAN FLEE FROM GOD. GOD IN CHRIST IS THERE. WE MAY NOT KNOW IT, BUT IT IS SO. THAT’S WHY IT’S IMPORTANT TO OPEN OURSELVES UP TO WRESTLE WITH SCRIPTURE, TO SEEK UNDERSTANDING OF WHO GOD IS IN JESUS CHRIST SO WE DON’T MISS THE MOMENT BY MOMENT PRESENCE OF THE ONE WHO ABIDES IN US AND WITH US.

GOD LOVES EACH OF US AND CARES FOR US BEYOND OUR OWN HOPES AND DREAMS. GOD IS PRESENT IN OUR HURTS AND JOYS, OUR PAINS AND SORROWS. IF ONLY WE WERE AWARE EACH MOMENT. THIS IS WHY WE ARE CALLED TO BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT OUR LIVES AS CHRISTIANS, TO STUDY AND GROW THROUGHOUT OUR LIVES. IT IS A LIFE LONG PROCESS OF JOURNEYING AND BEING FORMED AS A FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST.

THE EPISTLE PHILEMON IS A WONDERFUL SHORT LETTER. IT TELLS US ABOUT ONESIMUS – THE SLAVE WHO RAN AWAY FROM HIS MASTER PHILEMON. WE AREN'T TOLD WHY BUT ONESIMUS RAN AWAY, BUT IN THE PROCESS HE COMES TO KNOW THE APOSTLE PAUL WHO CONVERTS HIM TO JESUS CHRIST. PAUL TEACHES HIM, BECOMES LIKE A FATHER TO HIM. AT SOME POINT, PAUL DETERMINES HE MUST SEND ONESIMUS BACK TO PHILEMON. SO PAUL WRITES TO PHILEMON AND ASKS PHILEMON NOT TO PUNISH ONESIMUS BUT ACCEPT HIM BACK NOT AS A SLAVE, BUT AS A BROTHER IN CHRIST. HAS PHILEMON LEARNED THE SAME LESSON OF LOVE THROUGH JESUS CHRIST THAT ONESIMUS HAD LEARNED? WERE THEY ABLE TO BE RECONCILED? WAS FORMATION IN CHRIST ENOUGH TO ALLOW BE RECONCILIATION – NOT AS MASTER AND SLAVE BUT AS BROTHERS IN CHRIST?

IN THE GOSPEL. JESUS CALLS HIS FOLLOWERS TO TAKE THEIR CROSS AND FOLLOW HIM. THAT IS, THE WAY OF THE CROSS. DISCIPLESHIP IS NOT EASY. DISCIPLES ARE CALLED TO MAKE GOD IN CHRIST YOUR FIRST COMMITMENT. ALL OTHERS LINE UP BEHIND THAT CALL – FAMILY, FRIENDS, WORK, ETC. ON ONE HAND ONE MUST COUNT THE COST – BUT ON THE OTHER ONE MUST COUNT WHAT IS LOST IF YOU DO NOT. IT'S A CALL WE ALL FACE AND HAVE TO ASK OURSELVES – WHAT DO I GAIN BY FOLLOWING CHRIST, WHAT DO I LOSE IF I DO NOT?

LIFE IS A JOURNEY. WE ARE AT THE VERY SIMPLEST LEVEL – CREATED AND LOVED BY GOD. WE'RE CALLED TO WALK WITH GOD IN CHRIST – WHETHER WE UNDERSTAND OR NOT.—GOD MADE US AND CREATED US. THAT IS WHAT IS BEING EXPRESSED IN BOTH JEREMIAH AND PSALM 139.

GOD LOVES EACH OF US DEEPLY. THAT DOES NOT MEAN THAT LIFE WILL BE EASY OR WITHOUT PAIN. THIS IS AN UNREALISTIC EXPECTATION. LIFE IS FILLED WITH JOY AND WITH DISAPPOINTMENTS, PAIN, HURT, LOSS. AND YET, EVEN WHEN

WE RAIL AGAINST GOD IN OUR HURT AND PAIN, GOD IS STILL THERE. I LOVE THE PSALMS WHERE THE PSALMIST RAILS AGAINST GOD. I KNOW IT'S OKAY FOR ME TOO.

I KNOW ALSO GOD LOVES US. JESUS CHRIST IS THE MANIFESTATION OF THIS LOVE. AS THE POEM "FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND" SAYS, WHEN THE HARD TIMES COME, JESUS PICKS US UP AND CARRIES US.

WHAT ARE WE TO DO – WE WHO HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED AND CALLED INTO CHRIST? HOW DO WE JOURNEY WITH CHRIST? DO WE TAKE THE ATTITUDE I KNOW IT ALL, I HAVE ALL I NEED – I DON'T NEED TO GROW IN MY FAITH? OR IS THERE SOMETHING IN YOU THAT KEEPS GNAWING AT YOU – THAT KEEPS YOU COMING TO CHURCH WEEK AFTER WEEK? THAT KEEPS YOU SEEKING? COULD IT BE THAT GOD IS CALLING YOU INTO A DEEPER PLACE?

IN MY YOUNG ADULT YEARS, I WRESTLED WITH "WHO IS GOD",. "IS THERE A GOD?" THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I THOUGHT I MIGHT BE AN AGNOSTIC. I WASN'T SURE WHAT I BELIEVED OR IF BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION MEANT ANYTHING AT ALL. YET IN THAT MOMENT OF FEAR, SHOCK AS I SAT WAITING OUTSIDE AN EXAMINING ROOM IN TRIPLER ARMY HOSPITAL WHILE THE DOCTORS TRIED TO REVIVE SHAUN – IN THAT MOMENT OF PARALYZING PAIN AND FEAR OF THE LOSS OF THIS CHILD, I SUDDENLY KNEW THAT GOD IS – JESUS IS.

PERHAPS SUCH A REVELATION MIGHT NOT HAVE COME WITHOUT SOME YEARS IN SUNDAY SCHOOL, CONFIRMATION – WHO KNOWS. BUT WHAT CAME LATER WAS AN HUNGER TO KNOW MORE ABOUT GOD IN CHRIST. THIS IS WHAT BOB AND I HOPE FOR EACH OF YOU – THAT YOU WILL RECOGNIZE THAT GOD IS CALLING YOU TO GROW, TO BE FORMED IN CHRIST. CONFIRMATION AND BAPTISM ARE NOT THE END, BUT ONLY THE BEGINNING. YOU AND I ARE ON A JOURNEY IN CHRIST. WE ARE CALLED TO GROW AND TO BE FORMED. THAT IS WHY WE ARE PRESSING EACH OF YOU – ADULTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO CONSIDER BEING FAITHFUL ATTENDEES OF

SUNDAY SCHOOL. THIS FALL WE WILL OFFER ON SUNDAY MORNINGS A SERIES ENTITLED “LIVING THE QUESTIONS”. IT WILL GIVE ALL OF US AN OPPORTUNITY TO WRESTLE, TO ASK, TO SEARCH. IT IS OPEN TO ADULTS AND THOSE IN HIGH SCHOOL.

THE YOUNGER SET NEEDS A CONSIST OPPORTUNITY TO JOURNEY IN CHRIST TOO. THEIR TIME IN SUNDAY SCHOOL IS IMPORTANT. YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT SMALL NUGGET ON A PARTICULAR SUNDAY WILL COME TO THE SURFACE TO SUPPORT IN A DIFFICULT TIME SOMETIME IN THE FUTURE.

BOB AND I RECOGNIZE THAT WE ALL HAVE BUSY LIVES TODAY, MOST OF YOU CANNOT ATTEND MIDWEEK CLASSES. YOUR TIME FOR CHRISTIAN FORMATION IS TODAY – SUNDAY. GOD CALLS YOU NOT TO COFFEE IN THE KITCHEN, CHIT-CHAT OR EVEN SLEEPING IN AFTER A LATE NIGHT – BUT TO CHALLENGING FORMATION THAT YOU MIGHT BE MADE IN THE IMAGE OF CHRIST. IT IS A LIFE LONG JOURNEY

Lord,
 It costs a lot
 to walk with you,
 carrying our cross,
 not clinging to anything, anyone.

Palaces,
 portfolios, chickens,
 clothes, cars, cows, books, favorite chairs.

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our sun,

our moon,

our everything.

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MAY WE ALLOW YOU TO WORK IN OUR LIVES – TO PUT ASIDE OUR EXCUSES, OUR FEARS SO THAT WE OPEN OUR HEARTS TO YOU AND ALL YOU HAVE FOR US.