

Sermon Pentecost 6A: Rev. Margaret Otterburn 7-12-2020

Our book group is reading “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn” for our August meeting. It is about Brooklyn in the early 20th century. The family members it portrays are very poor and live in poor neighborhoods. In one chapter it describes the weekly screenings by the nurse at the local school. All the children identified that day with head lice are made to stand in front of the class and are ridiculed for being dirty. They have to make sure their heads are thoroughly washed and lice free before returning. The following week the new set of lice ridden kids are victimized in the same way and those jeering include the ones previously taunted the week before. You would have hoped that those ridiculed would show compassion on the new set of “dirty” kids, but not a bit of it. It seems that kids learn very early to be winners not losers and to jump at the chance to be better in some way than others. Knowing there are winners and losers, that life is unfair and can be very hard was quickly learned by the family members and in particular, the featured character, the little girl growing up in Brooklyn at that time.

But I do not think that was special to that time or place, I can see today it is the same. The book I am currently reading, Michelle Alexander’s “The New Jim Crow” identifies the way the War on Drugs has reduced to second-class citizenship many who are African American. It has been documented that police regularly raid poor urban black families homes where there are black youth looking for drugs but do not raid white family homes, even though well off white youth have been proved to be greater drug users than poor black youth. Young black men have become perpetual losers in our nation.

And from the beginning, from earliest Bible stories there were winners and losers too. The story of Cain and Abel, sons of Adam and Eve, tells how God accepted Abel’s gift but rejected Cain’s. This resulted in jealous Cain killing Abel. Not much brotherly love shown there, and who would you say was the winner – Abel, dead but acclaimed by God or Cain, alive but weighed down forever by guilt?

In our first reading today, we heard of Esau and Jacob, twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah, with Esau born first. A question for you to consider is whether they became estranged through life experiences such as knowing their mom and dad had preferences – or were they predestined by God to be estranged? If you think everything about life is predestined you will answer one way, if you think God gave us free will, you will answer another way. In the latter case, where I am in this, I think God was aware of the natures of all four family members and what would inevitably happen, but God did not make it happen. We heard how Esau was hungry and Jacob used his hunger to take from him the privilege Esau had of being first born; what they called his birthright. Today families don’t automatically favor the first born with special privileges but in biblical times they did. For example, scholars tell us that in Jesus time when a Jewish man died his property was divided between his sons with one extra portion included, meaning if there were three sons there would be four portions. The eldest got his own and the extra one. Birthright was important. Whatever the deal was in Isaac’s time it favored the first born and so Jacob became the winner and Esau the loser.

In our reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans it seems as if we are all winners and losers. Assuming if I asked you if you are in Christ, you will say that, yes, you are in Christ and you are a part of the body of Christ, then you are a winner. That is good news. But in this reading Paul talks a lot about the flesh. He reminds you that when you spend your time thinking about yourself, and your own wants and needs, what you look like, then you are separating yourself from Jesus Christ. Your body is of course important. You do need to look after it, but should it be obsessive? Spending time thinking about your own needs always seems a priority, does it not? Right now, a top priority is to be safe, meaning not to be near anyone with the covid-19 virus. It also means looking after yourself, being as healthy as you can. But, like anything else, that can be overdone. The ads for healthy living are many. They tell you that you are not healthy enough and unless you use whatever product they offer you will be a loser. The goal seems to be to look good and be fit and active. As I said, it can be overdone. A United Methodist Pastor said that at a recent clergy conference buttons were given out which said, "The Best Me is a Fit Me." Apparently being overweight was seen as a negative when someone was considered for ordination. So, your body can seem to make you a loser, yet you can be a winner if you turn your focus on being in Christ, following Jesus example of living and loving other people. You never heard Jesus speak about his diet or how many steps he took each day. He spent his ministry caring for people, whatever they looked like. If you were much healthier twenty years ago did God love you more then, than now? Of course not! God loves you, you today, just as you are, even if you aren't as fit and healthy as you would wish to be. You can work on that issue if you choose, but God loves you; you are a winner if you live with this uppermost in your heart and mind.

And more good news is that Jesus has a special job for you, as one of his winners. You heard it is the Gospel today. You are to be a sower. You are to follow his example, the example of the man in his parable who liberally sowed seeds. The man sowed extravagantly, he had plenty and had no need to worry about running out of seeds. It reminds me of times when I had something wonderful to share and wanted everyone to know. When I have been at rallies and marches and we have all been proclaiming the messages of the specific protest, we always kept on calling out; we never said we only have so many words we could say, we kept repeating one message and then another. We wanted the whole world or at least that neighborhood, and especially all people with power to hear our message. We were extravagant. We knew that just as in Jesus' parable there would be listeners who would pay no attention, others who heard and then might think about our message for a short while and then forget about it, others who agreed and wanted to join but then got distracted by their own needs. But we knew the message could reach those in power so there was the possibility that could be change. We have seen such a scenario with the protests after the death of George Floyd. The message of the protesters that racism is very alive in our nation went out loud and clear to all who were willing to listen. I am still reading, "The New Jim Crow" and was inspired to do so because of the recent protests.

In the same way Jesus wants you to be a sower for him, a sower of his love. In his story it did not matter where the sower cast the seeds, so the same applies to you today. So, you can be a sower for Jesus with whom you speak to, where you are, whether it is by speaking writing or doing. But Jesus wants you to be a sower. In his story the sower had plenty of seeds and knew they would not all fall on fertile soil, but he spread the seeds anyway. He did not question the soil before tossing the seeds on it. He did not say, "Will you produce a healthy plant?" He gave all soil types the possibility of thriving. So, you are today asked to be a sower. On Wednesday 5 of us went to the NJ Community Food Bank. We were there from Messiah. Of course, while we were working none of us were talking about matters of faith to others, but the organizers knew we were from Messiah; our presence was the sowing of Christ's love. We were needed and worked hard. Soon our community garden will be flourishing, and two of us will take the produce to the food pantries. They will be sharing Christ's love as a message from us all here, with produce lovingly tended by Frank's expert gardening skills. Last week and previously two of us came with me to Cross Roads camp and we worked where needed on the property. Our thrift shop opened this week. Many people have called about it over the weeks, in fact, the months it has been closed. Diane's ministry of love shines out in the way she cares for it and encourages people to help sort (safely and alone) as well as by serving customers. Recently a Messiah member suffered a stroke. There have been several of you who have brought meals or provided rides for her. When I needed food to take to Homeless Solutions to serve for the meal about a dozen of you brought the meat loaves and the desserts I needed. There was always enough. Maybe you told other people what you were doing; it was a sharing of Christ's love.

When you work with others in ministry, you are sharing Christ's love, you are being a sower. When you help others you and they are all winners, not losers because you feel good about helping and they get the help they need.

As time moves on, I am sure you are thinking about changes you can safely make during this time when you know you are still in the covid-19 crisis. Some of you feel it is better for you and family members to stay isolated until a vaccine is available. That is a good decision; the best one for you as your safety and the safety of those you love is high priority. Others of you will recognize that NJ is opening up and opportunities such as Messiah having an early morning service including Holy Eucharist seems a great step forward and you want to participate. You have to make sure you are making the best decision for you. You need to feel safe and thus a winner. You may decide that be safely being out in the community serving others safely is where you are called to be and thus you are a winner. If you are among those asking if there are needs and how you can help – yes, there are many needs and many ways of helping. But whether you are out in the community or at home you can still share Christ's love by the messages you send, by the phone calls you make, by the cards you mail. You can pray for those in need; those in the Messiah community, those working as health care teams in any capacity, those making decisions for our well-being locally, nationally, and globally. When you are active in this ministry or any other you are serving Christ, you are in Christ and a winner for Christ.

I close with words from theologian Fred Buechner, "Go forth into the world knowing there are words of hope and healing which will never be said unless you say them, and deeds of compassion and caring which will never be done unless you do them.

Amen