

Sermon Pentecost 5A 2020: Rev. Margaret Otterburn 7-5-2020

Today we began the worship with the hymn, "Joyful, Joyful we adore thee, God of glory Lord of love." It was sung to the wonderful music of Beethoven. "Joyful" seems a good description of the reaction of Abraham's servant who arrived at that specific well and found Rebekah there, the prospective bride for Abraham's son, Isaac. Those lyrics, "Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, drive the dark of doubt away," could have been sung by her family as she prepared to leave home for this arranged marriage, set up for Rebekah and Isaac. It was also joyful to hear read "she became his wife; and he loved her." Some arranged marriages we know have become marriages of love. Of course, we note that while we heard that Isaac loved Rebekah, the man or men writing this story seemed to have no interest in learning whether or not Rebekah loved Isaac. They understood that women were property, not human beings with opinions and feelings that counted.

The mood changed with the hymn we just heard Laura sing, "I heard the voice of Jesus say, 'Come unto me and rest; and in your weariness lay down your head upon my breast.' I came to Jesus as I was, so weary, worn and sad; I found in him a resting place, and he has made me glad." These words match those from the last part of the Gospel today. We are no longer focusing on happy marriages and the willingness of two young people to marry each other. These words of Jesus might be your words if you have been in isolation for a long time. You are weary with each day being the same. You are alone, only electronic means connects you with others. You do not want to risk getting the corona virus, but the worry and stress is really wearing you out. It is to you Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." You are longing for an end for isolation and yet the nation is not making progress, almost everywhere except in the north east it is getting worse, so we are told. Jesus invites you to spend time with him, to go to him. You can be with him in worship by joining me and others. Every day of the week except Saturday there is an opportunity for you to join with me and others in prayer. You can also use meditations and guides either from books or online. I can help you find them. You may not be with others yet, but you can always contact them and pray for them. Jesus says "Come to me" meaning for you to hear him and respond to him.

But there are others who hear the words differently. The Rev. Canon Stephanie Sellers, an African American priest and a member of our Presiding Bishop's staff wrote an article "America, why can't you stop killing us?" in the most recent set of "vestry papers," or articles for vestry members to read. She wrote, "the cumulated evidence suggests America is nearly incapable of allowing people of color as a group to thrive. Our nation is sick, addicted to the diminishment, elimination and control of Black, Latino, Native and Asian lives ... whatever is necessary to ensure the flourishing of White people and culture." She said we have to tell the truth about the situation, and further cites, "People of color suffer police brutality and mass incarceration, economic deprivation, chronic unemployment, discrimination in hiring and promotion, inadequate education, crumbling public housing, discriminatory banking policies,

defunded public health systems, environmental devastation in our backyards, systematic destruction of our thriving neighborhoods, second-class citizenship in many churches and dioceses and so much more.

She insists that, ‘The church is to Become the Beloved Community’ (she used BBC – not the way I think of what BBC means of course but I am happy to accept there are other meanings for these three letters.) In her dream of the Beloved Community she says, “We dream of communities where all people may experience dignity and abundant life and see themselves and others as beloved children of God. We pray for communities that labor so that the flourishing of every person (and all creation) is seen as the hope of each person..... It’s a vision of a world where oppressed people are liberated from oppression, and oppressors are liberated from their need to oppress.”

She wrote how she had been with Episcopal leaders to Montgomery Alabama and visited the site of the museum where on the ceiling 800 monuments like coffins or bodies were suspended. She said it seemed to make you think you were at a lynching and watching as people had done so in the past when they came to a lynching bringing their families and picnic baskets to make a nice trip.

She goes on, “Why can’t America stop killing us? The white national project needs us to serve as the disposable tools and fuel that make it work. The system breaks down if people of color step into our full humanity and citizenship. State-sanctioned racial terror – lynching, but also as native slaughter and relocation, chattel slavery, Japanese internment camps, Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration, the War on Drugs, post 9/11 Islamophobia, immigrant detention and deportation – is inevitable, if you have to maintain the racial hierarchy on which the nation and white identity are built.”

Yes, the Black community along with all communities of color want to rest; they are weary from protesting against all the wrong done against them, all the evil which has been inflicted upon them.

I am currently reading Michelle Alexander’s, “The New Jim Crow.” Which describes how the prison population soared from about 300,000 before the war on drugs began to a staggering 2.3 million now. For the Black community, the fact that 40% of those incarcerated are black but only 13% of nation is black is a terrible statistic. Michelle Alexander tells us that one in three black youths today can expect to be incarcerated. Once a person has been arrested, he or she becomes a second-class citizen with no access to public housing, food stamps and other benefits. They are really weary as a community, suffering because of the lack of justice for all. Hence her book title, “The New Jim Crow.”

Returning one more time to Stephanie Spellers she offers hope based on the work and ministry of the Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, “We will need to individually and corporately live into the pledge we’ve made as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement: *repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done and the evil done on our behalf.*”

But we can do this, and we can move forward. With so much information in our minds and on our hearts and the awareness that all people of color are weary and in need of rest, we can all learn from Jesus. He said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." We can learn from the past. We can learn that we need to respect the dignity of each person in this community, in this nation, in this planet we call earth.

I read of one place where respecting those of another culture and race has been very positive both for those who were the foreigners seeking help and those living locally wanting to help. In Northern England, many asylum seekers from Iran have been gathering in the past few years. From arriving in the south, they have been sent further north where living is cheaper. One man, Saman said his home in Iran had been raided and his friend arrested after their protest about rising prices. He ran away, crossing into Turkey and got truck rides which lasted many days until finally he was told he was in England. He was sent to live in the northern city of Sunderland and became aware that the local church of England was reaching out and helping asylum seekers. He was very appreciative, wondering why the church was helping him and other Moslems. He made a friend Hamid who had become a Christian. He noticed that while he and Hamid were both asylum seekers Hamid was warm and happy, and he was depressed. Hamid shared that believing in Christ changed his life. The article I read spoke about the way many, many Iranians have become Christians and have appreciated the support they initially received and have continued to receive and are now evangelizing other Iranians. The church they attend offer Farsi speakers headsets to translate the English into Farsi. The church has shared their burdens and offered them the opportunity to learn from Jesus and to learn of Jesus. A wonderful story of hope both for the churches which had seen decreasing membership over recent decades and for all the new arrivals seeking asylum.

I am not sure how many of us feel as wretched as the Apostle Paul describes because of the sin and guilt that lies on our hearts, especially over the racism article. But we need for sure to recognize all the feelings of racism we experience, and any thoughts which are evil (by evil I mean intentionally bad, wicked.) Will we, can we as a nation create a nation where everyone feels respected and of equal merit in every sense? I do not know. But we should never give up working toward that day when as our closing hymn will say, "sweet land of liberty" meaning liberty for all of us and not just those with white privilege. We are celebrating Independence Day, this weekend, but we should be clamoring for independence for all. This same hymn continues, "May our land be bright with freedom's holy light; protect us by thy might, great God our King." Let us all strive to make the "us" mean all who live in this land.

Yes, we ask for God's protection. The hymns say we, not some but all of us. May we strive together to bring this to fruition, may we each know the peace that comes from God when we lay our heavy burdens at the feet of Jesus.

And may you know the rest for your soul that he promises, today and every day. Amen