

Sermon Pentecost 8 A: Rev. Margaret Otterburn 26 July 2020

When I lived in England, we did not celebrate Halloween. I don't even think I would have known what it was. But we did "Remember, remember the 5<sup>th</sup> of November. Gunpowder Treason and Plot!" This was the evening we lit bonfires and let off fireworks. As a kid we had a little bonfire and a few fireworks in the yard with another family. It was fun. My older brother, aged 12 or 13 with a few of his friends told me about the tricks they used to play. They would buy "penny bangers" which were small fireworks that made a very loud noise when they went off. For his story you need to be aware that English homes had mail boxes in their front doors. My brother said they would go to an old lady's house and light one and put it through her mail box. What a trick! As far as I know there was never any damage done to any of the elderly victims and of course he may have been lying anyway!

Playing tricks is often fun. But sometimes trick playing can be taken too far. Jacob, whose story we heard in our first reading, had played tricks on his elder brother Esau and on his father before fleeing his home. The tricks on Esau were not for fun, Jacob had taken Esau's birthright and the Blessing, their father's gift for his eldest son, which he intended for Esau. When angry Esau threatened to kill him, Jacob hurriedly left home., ostensibly to find a wife from the home of their extended family, Jacob was a trickster; but today we heard how he was the victim of a trick and it was not a fun trick either. We don't know what more Jacob actually said to Laban, when he woke up the morning after his wedding night with his wife. He had expected to see Rachel, but instead it was Leah. We know he had to agree to spend the week with Leah as her husband before he could be with Rachel and had to serve another 7 years for the privilege of marrying Rachel. Jacob the man who is to be given the name "Israel" and will become the father of the twelve tribes of the Israelites was both a trickster and now, he was a victim, tricked by his father in law. Jacob's life was certainly not one which was God centered, easy, virtuous, and painless. Does this help you when you know you might have tricked someone at some time in your life, or you might have been very angry when you were tricked? The Bible is full of people with problems, who do things which are not always good, who get angry, play dirty, but still are loved by God.

As I think about Jacob's life I sigh and want to reflect on those words of St Paul we heard today: "That very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God who searches the hearts knows what is in the mind of the Spirit..." Maybe you can imagine God looking down on our world and sighing at the mess we are in. Can you imagine God focusing on you? Is that an easy thought or not?

Paul, goes on to say, "If God is for us, who is against us?" and "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" What powerful questions, rhetorical of course. This is true, down to earth theology, no trickery or deceit. God is our God, who loves us and cares for us. Paul wrote these words after years of preaching about Jesus, being a missionary for Jesus Christ. He had suffered much, he had been beaten, stoned, imprisoned, and suffered hardship on all his travels. But he knew that God was with him, every day, in fact every moment of each day. For Paul there was

nothing more important than sharing the love of God, preaching the good news of Jesus Christ who lived and died and rose to life so that everyone then just as everyone today can be saved by his grace and through his unconditional love.

If you have heard me preach before you will know I do not often quote from Paul; but this chapter 8 from his letter to the Romans, and especially these last verses are some of the most powerful he wrote, in my opinion, of course.

So, I share another verse from this wonderful passage by Paul, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” Returning to Jacob from the first reading, you could say yes, you can see how true that verse is for him. Many years later he returns home with his two wives, their maids, the children and all his herds and flocks to be reconciled with Esau. Yes, thing did work for good for Jacob who earlier in life had promised to obey God.

Today I hope you can spend time thinking how this verse is true for you. As I reflect on my life, I thank God that yes, it was good for me to have a relationship with God all my life. Through it I wanted to do outreach and thus was able to meet Mike at a community service work camp. It was good for me to become a teacher as I had always hoped, and to marry Mike. It was good, even if challenging at times, to move to Northern Ireland, and there to give birth to our three children. It was good, even if very challenging at times, to bring them to the US, and then, very good for me to follow the long road to ordination, to be called to serve God in different churches, a cathedral and of course, to be here with you all.

Can you see how God had worked in you life? Life is always full of challenges, but often when You reflect you can see that you were led through them. Sometimes it can be just like that “Footprints in the Sand” message; God carried you when the going was really tough. I know too that there were many times when God carried me through.

As well as reflecting on the words from St. Paul, we heard Jesus speaking to us through several parables today. Jesus was talking about the kingdom of heaven and you may feel very uncertain what he meant by the kingdom of heaven. Let me remind you, soon you will be praying to God, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” I understand Jesus to mean that when we make earth the place where God’s will is done, a place where we show that we love God in all we do and that we love our neighbors, all of them, as much as we love ourselves then we are in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said many times the kingdom of heaven is here, and we can experience it if only we will live into it. Right now, our nation is challenged in that we are not loving God and not loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. When we do not socially distant ourselves from others and when we go to events without wearing a mask, we are saying to others that we do not love them and do not care if we spread the covid-19 virus. When we show racist attitudes; when our lawmakers pass laws that negatively affect people newly released from incarceration which particularly apply to young black males, we are not showing them love and compassion. Upon release I understand they have lost the right to even apply

for many jobs because they have to indicate they have a record, they cannot get public housing, cannot get food stamps, and are required to pay huge fines. Thus they can never be free to build a new life. We provide help for those who are addicted to alcohol; we incarcerate those possessing even a small amount of drugs. Can we make laws that show love and support those who need support instead of building more prisons and jails?

But things can change; in the first two parables of Jesus we heard today Jesus said that from something as tiny as a mustard seed, a tree can grow. As a very amateur gardener I have planted tiny seeds and am so happy and, I admit, amazed when they grow well. In the next parable the woman used a small amount of yeast and a huge amount of bread was made – enough to feed about 100~150 so scholars told me. Thus, from even a small change such as everyone making the decision to wear a mask and/or the prosecutors being willing to rethink how they are treating Black youth, things could improve in our nation.

St. Paul would have agreed that yes, he understood the next parables Jesus told about the field and the pearl. He would have agreed that the parables applied to him. He would have said that yes, he was as it were “plowing his field” in that he was doing what he thought was his job, what he was called to do as he journeyed to Damascus when he was met by a vision of Jesus. He stopped to listen to Jesus; his life was forever changed by his conversion. Then he used all he had to proclaim the Gospel, searching for Jesus, and growing closer to him each day, just like seeking a valuable pearl. He became an amazing missionary; he gave his life for Christ and the Gospel.

What about you? As you go about your daily life plowing the field as it were, have you stopped to see what treasure is out there? Jesus asks you to consider giving what you have so that you can have the field with treasure. What are you searching for? Is there something that you know you want to have? Is it a deeper relationship with God? Are you looking for more meaningful ways to spend your time? What is Jesus asking you to give, to take on, to let go of? He’s talking about priorities. What are yours?

Today’s three lessons are all very compelling. Even though each is unique I suggest they share a common theme of “hope.” Jacob hoped to marry the woman he loved, which he did eventually. Jesus told his listeners that they could achieve amazing things by persevering to follow God’s ways. St. Paul wrote amazing words of hope, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

So today you can be aware of how much God loves you, despite all the things you do which are not good. You heard that St Paul said that there is nothing that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. However small and weak you feel your faith is, your relationship with God is, it can grow. God will be with you. And you heard, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according

to his purpose.” You are called, you are a part of God’s purpose in the world; I pray you may continue each day to grow closer to God and to fulfil more closely his purposes for you.

Amen