All Saints’ Church October 29, 2017

Pentecost 21 Year A

Leviticus 19:1-2; 15-18 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Psalm 1 Matthew 22:34-46

Dear Lord, thank you for sending your gentleness among us,

like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. Amen.

I have traveled through deserts: Arabian, African and Judean. In those travels, gifts have been revealed to me, coming from secret places, not only from my own heart, but also from the ***stark*….*expansive*…. *unforgiving….***landscape of sky, sand and rock.

Deserts ***reveal, strip, and expose***; and whatever you thought about ***your own power*** and ***your own intellect*** and ***your own faith*** is small in the face of such far-reaching space that knows no end and no partiality.

It’s as if the experience of desert-travel grabs a corner of your soul and won’t let go. You are held at the mercy of its light. Any illusion that you can attain what’s real in life by grabbing at it, ***is dismissed***. Life will not be grabbed at, and only when you surrender to how overwhelmed you are, will you find a way in…. to see beyond just appearances, beyond just the surface of things. And you will trust in this new sight as emerging from the Source of all Creation. A knowledge that transcends intellect.

This is the blessing of the desert, and its curse: you are not in control.

Desert dwellers know this, and what has emerged out of the desert is the gift of welcome and support to the sojourner. Since we are all sojourners, all wanderers, throughout all deserts are sign-posts to safety- markers pointing the way to water, to shelter, to well-being: the gift of hospitality and protection and presence given freely to both enemy and friend. There is no judgment, just the response of an open tent. All become neighbors.

I don’t think it is a coincidence that all three monotheistic faiths emerged out of the desert. The truth is we’ve all experienced “desert-travel” - nursing a dying spouse, sibling, friend or child; dealing with a loved one and their addiction; the loss of a job, the fear of failure, letting your children grow up, dealing with depression. You can add to this list of desert experiences. Yes, I have literally travelled in deserts, but so have you.

When I was in Arabia, both in the city and in the desert, a phrase I heard repeatedly, “Ahlan wa-sahlan.” I asked how to translate. “Not easy,” was the response. Literally the phrase means, “family and plane,” but really it’s shorthand for a Bedouin greeting:

“Traveler, you have now arrived within your family and may your feet tread on an easy plane.” (Also explained in Muhammad Asad’s *The Road to Mecca*).

In other words, for a moment there is release from the demons that chase you, and you will be embraced. Tomorrow is only a fleeting thought, a mirage- right now take this sweet milk, a warm blanket, and let me wash your tired feet.

Or as Jesus invites, “Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.”

Oh yes! Jesus is a man of the desert. And when tested with a question about the Law, Jesus answers from the Law emerging from the Desert: ***Surrender***.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”“This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like unto it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

***God first, God last, God always. Surrender to this as Reality, and it will guide you to the true path of freedom***.

Jesus is not just quoting from his holy scriptures; he is creating theology. Because “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus is not offering advice or demanding a charitable attitude. Jesus is saying that a life of striving for perfection under the Law is a life lost. You can’t love God this way. You might as well be in the desert with no way out, subject to eternal thirst, fear and isolation.

You are not just you, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; you are the man and woman of the desert, sustained only by the destiny of God’s hope in you which calls you to love and give deeply, widely, and freely, within a quality of timelessness which lacks all defining limits, makes all things, formless in shape, yet is open to all sides.

In other words, your individual salvation never depends on only you and your acts, but rather on the collective community of all of us. Simply put, though not easy: Loving God involves loving our neighbor, by ***acting on behalf*** of our neighbor.

One of my favorite theologians, G.K. Chesterton makes it clear: “We make our friends; we make our enemies; but God makes our next-door neighbor….. clad in all the careless terrors of nature; strange as the stars, reckless and indifferent as the rain. The neighbor is Humanity, the most terrible of beasts.”

Yet Jesus’ wisdom rises when he “speaks not of one’s duty towards humanity, but of one’s duty towards one’s neighbor.”

Jesus makes this claim in a world defined by suffering, violence, sickness, inequities, and greed, not that different from our own world- from our own wilderness. And in this wilderness, we have one response: loving God through service to our neighbor.

The remarkable gift here, is that, (strange as it is), by loving our neighbor, we are also learning how to love ourselves. Jesus is clear- ***when we welcome those in need, we also welcome our own needy selves***. Jesus, the guile detector always, is like the desert, revealing our essence.

We are all sojourners, with empty hands, standing in need at the edge of the desert, often lost, in want of protection, support, dignity and security. It’s our illusion of control that keeps us from this insight. That’s why the desert is such a gift.

This past Friday, I made a visit to Plowshare Farm, an intentional community of members living with those who have a variety of disabilities/abilities, where every person and every aspect of the natural world can be learned from and valued.

While there, I was reminded of Jean Vanier, founder of the L’Arche communities, homes much like Plowshare Farm, who said this:

“People come to our communities because they want to serve the poor; they will only stay once they have discovered that they themselves are the poor. And they discover something extraordinary: that Jesus came to bring the good news to the poor, not to those who serve the poor.”

Ah yes, we are the poor, not always easy to admit, and we are all in need of God’s womb of love and compassion.

Our birth out of this womb of love comes through serving each other, neighbors, sojourners, strangers, enemies alike, and as we serve each other, we serve the deepest part of ourselves.

And together, in whatever desert we are in, we are walking the path to true freedom, filled with Gods’ Grace to make the journey. AMEN.