

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: PROPER 16A

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Psalm 124

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

AUGUST 27, 2023

St. David's Episcopal

N. Chesterfield, VA

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JESUS ASKED THE DISCIPLES, "WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM?" THEY ANSWERED, "JOHN THE BAPTIST,"..... "ELIJAH,".... "ONE OF THE PROPHETS". BUT, – AGAIN HE ASKED THE TWELVE, WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?" PETER RESPONDED – "YOU ARE THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD."

MUCH OF OUR LIVES ARE SPENT TRYING TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION. WHO IS JESUS? WHO DO WE SAY THAT JESUS IS. IT'S A PART OF OUR JOURNEY. WE WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT HIM, TO UNDERSTAND HIM A LITTLE MORE EACH DAY. IT'S A LIFELONG QUEST. IT COULD BE LIKENED TO THE QUEST THAT EACH OF THE KNIGHTS OF KING ARTHUR'S ROUNDTABLE FOLLOWED AS THEY SOUGHT THE HOLY GRAIL. FOR JESUS IS OUR HOLY GRAIL.

AS A YOUNGSTER I DIDN'T SEE ANY CONNECTION BETWEEN THE QUEST FOR THE HOLY GRAIL AND OUR DESIRE TO KNOW JESUS/GOD DEEPLY AND PERSONALLY. I SAW THE JOURNEY OF KING ARTHUR'S VARIOUS KNIGHTS AS STORIES OF LONG AGO. LITTLE DID I REALIZE THAT THESE STORIES OF THE KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE WERE METAPHORS FOR OUR OWN LIVES – THAT OUR LIVES ARE DRIVEN BY OUR YEARNING FOR GOD – TO KNOW JESUS THE CHRIST – TO KNOW THE MEANING OF LIFE, TO KNOW LOVE.. LIKE THOSE "OLD TIMEY KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE WE ARE LOOKING FOR OUR HOLY GRAIL – GOD – FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT.

IT'S A LIFE LONG JOURNEY. WE ARE ALWAYS MOVING TOWARD GOD. BUT, BUT WE NEVER COME TO A POINT WHERE WE CAN SAY DEFINITELY "I'VE FOUND GOD." OR – I'VE REACHED AN UNDERSTAND OF GOD IN ALL GOD'S FULLNESS AND HOLINESS!

INSTEAD, WE ARE SEEKERS – SEEKING GOD, JESUS, THE HOLY SPIRIT – THIS IS OUR HOLY GRAIL. IT’S OUR HOPE AND DESIRE TO KNOW CHRIST INTIMATELY. IT DRAWS US FORWARD ON OUR JOURNEY TOWARD A DEEPER RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IN CHRIST. THIS IS OUR LIFE’S JOURNEY: – “TO KNOW CHRIST AND TO MAKE HIM KNOWN.”

AS WE TRAVEL THIS ROAD NEW THINGS KEEP UNFOLDING AND OPENING UP. WE CATCH FLEETING GLIMPSES OF GOD IN CHRIST– IN QUIET MOMENTS, IN THE WORLD AROUND US, IN WORSHIP, IN JOYFUL GATHERINGS OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS, IN TIMES OF REGRET, OF CONFESSION AND SEEKING FORGIVENESS. WE LEARN FROM OTHERS ON THE JOURNEY. LIKE ALL TRAVELERS WE NEED NOURISHMENT, GUIDANCE, AND CLEAR DIRECTION.

SOMETIMES SPECIAL OPPORTUNITIES COME OUR WAY – LIKE PARISH RETREATS, SUMMER CAMP, CURSILLO, KAIROS, VIA DE CHRISTO,. THERE ARE MOMENTS, WHEN WE CATCH A LIFE-CHANGING GLIMPSE OF GOD WORKING IN OUR LIVES OR IN THE LIVES OF OTHERS. LISTENING TO SOMEONE TELL OF HOW HIS LIFE HAS BEEN CHANGED BY GOD ALWAYS BRINGS GREAT JOY AND HOPE.

I FIND THAT SITTING IN A CENTERING PRAYER GROUP WITH ITS SILENCE OFFERS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ME TO BE STILL AND LISTEN FOR GOD’S QUIET, SMALL VOICE. MY LIFE AND PROBABLY YOURS ARE SO NOISY, SO ACTIVE. , SO IT IS ALWAYS GOOD TO BE QUIET, TO LISTEN FOR THE STILL SMALL VOICE OF GOD.

QUIET SERVICES LIKE THE 5:30 CELTIC SERVICE ON SUNDAYS AT ST. STEPHENS IN RICHMOND HAVE BEEN A VITAL PART OF MY SPIRITUAL LIFE FOR OVER TEN YEARS. ENTERING THIS CANDLIT SANCTUARY IS LIKE MOVING INTO A DEEP, CAVERNOUS COCOON – A SAFE PLACE – A WOMB WHERE THERE THE PRAYER AND REFLECTION. IT ALL SEEMS SO NATURAL. ONE IS OPENED FOR A QUIET ENCOUNTER GOD IN CHRIST.

AT OTHER TIMES, A BOOK HELPS US CATCH A GLIMPSE OF GOD. SEVERAL YEARS AGO, PASTOR ROB BELL WROTE LOVE WINS. HIS PREMISE WAS “GOD LOVES EVERY HUMAN BEING”. GOD CREATED EACH OF US, GOD LOVES ALL CREATION. AND, REGARDLESS OF HOW WE LIVE OUR LIVES, GOD’S LOVE IS PERMANENT, AND UNCONDITIONAL – FOR EVERYONE!. NO ONE IS EXCLUDED. NO ONE IS LEFT OUT. .

BELL’S LITTLE BOOK “LOVE WINS” WAS A CHALLENGE TO SOME CHURCHES’– ESPECIALLY WHERE THERE ARE RIGID RULES ABOUT WHO IS WELCOME, WHAT ONE BELIEVES, WHO WAS A MEMBER, AND WHO WAS ENTITLED TO RECEIVE COMMUNION..

BELL BELIEVES AS I DO THAT SUCH RULES AND DOGMA KEEP PEOPLE OUT! I BELIEVE AS HE DOES, EACH AND EVERY HUMAN BEING IS LOVED BY GOD. WE, LIKE GOD, LIKE JESUS, ARE CALLED TO LOVE GOD, TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER, TO LOVE ALL PEOPLE!.

SOME YEARS AGO WHEN I SUPPLIED HERE, I SAT WITH A GROUP WATCHING A DVD BY THIS SAME PASTOR ROB BELL ENTITLED THE LUMP. BELL TOLD THE STORY OF A LITTLE BOY – WHO HAD DONE SOMETHING VERY, VERY WRONG. HE’D GOTTEN CAUGHT. SO IN A PANIC, HE FLED TO HIS BEDROOM. HE RAN IN, SLAMMED THE DOOR SHUT, JUMPED ON HIS BED AND CRAWLED UNDER THE COVERS – HIDING – SAFE! SAFE FROM ANY PUNISHMENT OR RETRIBUTION!.

WHEN HIS FATHER ENTERED HIS ROOM, IT LOOKED EMPTY! HIS FATHER SAW ONLY A LUMP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BED. HE CAME OVER AND SAT ON THE BED. HE BEGAN TO TALK TO THE LUMP. HE DIDN’T REBUKE HIM OR BAWL HIM OUT. INSTEAD HE BEGAN TO TELL THE LUMP, HOW MUCH HE LOVED HIM AND ALWAYS WOULD. OVER AND OVER HE SAID,

“NOTHING WILL KEEP ME FROM LOVING YOU.

NOTHING YOU DO OR SAY WILL KEEP ME FROM LOVING YOU.

NOTHING YOU EVER DO WILL KEEP ME FROM LOVING YOU”.

FINALLY THE LITTLE BOY EMERGED FROM UNDER THE COVERS. HIS FATHER EMBRACED HIM AND AGAIN TOLD HIM HOW MUCH HE LOVES HIM.

THIS IS GOD’S LOVE – UNCONDITIONAL LOVE. IT’S THE LOVE THE FATHER HAD FOR HIS SON IN LUKE’S STORY OF THE PRODIGAL SON. IT’S THE VERY SAME LOVE GOD HAS FOR YOU AND FOR ME! – IT IS UNCONDITIONAL --- ALWAYS PRESENT --LOVE.

WHEN WE THINK OF FAMILY, FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS, EVEN THOSE WE DON’T LIKE, WE’RE CALLED TO REMEMBER THAT THE SAME LIFE AND SPARK OF GOD IS IN EACH OF THEM JUST AS IT IS IN YOU. WE ARE ALL BELOVED OF GOD.

LIKEWISE, WHEN WE SEE DIVISIONS IN OUR NATION – POLITICALLY – SOCIALLY, ECONOMICALLY, WE’RE CALLED TO REMEMBER THAT EVERYONE HAS THE VERY SAME SPARK OF GOD IN THEM. THIS ONENESS EXTENDS BEYOND OUR UNITED STATES TO PEOPLE IN THROUGHOUT THE WORLD – DIFFERENT CULTURES, DIFFERENT RELIGIONS, DIFFERENT LANGUAGES. EVERY PERSON HAS THE SAME LIFE AND SPARK OF GOD WITHIN.

WE ARE ALL BELOVED OF GOD – GOD’S CREATION. JESUS LIVED THIS OUT IN HIS EARTHLY LIFE SO THAT WE MIGHT KNOW THE DEPTH OF GOD’S LOVE. WHEN JESUS ASKS “WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

WE REPLY, “YOU ARE THE CHRIST, THE SON OF LIVING GOD.”

“YOU ARE THE ONE WHO BRINGS US ABUNDANT LIFE
THE ONE WHO SHOWS US HOW TO LIVE LIFE -- LOVING UNCONDITIONALLY”.