

September 1, 2019

All the Live-long Day

Shepherd's Grace Church

⁴Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. ⁵Thus says the LORD: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? ⁶They did not say, "Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?" ⁷I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. ⁸The priests did not say, "Where is the LORD?" Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit.

⁹Therefore once more I accuse you, says the LORD, and I accuse your children's children. ¹⁰Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. ¹¹Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. ¹²Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, ¹³for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water. (Jer. 2: 4-13)

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. ²Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. ³And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" ⁴But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. ⁵Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" ⁶And they could not reply to this.

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." ¹²He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14: 1-14)

(ed. Note—The sermon will only focus on v. 1 and 7-14, however it might be helpful to read the verses in between. They have been included for your convenience.)

The prophet Jeremiah invites us this morning to consider where we have come from. What worlds existed for us before we arrived at church this morning? Did we come from comfort and convenience? Was there hot coffee for us...even if we did not drink it? Was there hot water for our shower? Did we have clean clothes to put on? Did we have clothes at all? Did we have food to eat? Was it fresh and not spoiled? Where did we come from?

Of course, it is easy to answer if we only think of our immediate past but what kinds of different answers do we receive if we search our more distant memories? Have there been times in our lives when we have suffered from lack...from not having enough? Have there been times in our past when we have been seriously deficient in our need?

Has there been a hospital bill? Has there been a car repair? Has there been a house payment that was late? Has there been someone in our life that has been seriously in need and we have not been able to help or assist or even cure?

As the Lord speaks through Jeremiah this morning, I invite you to search back in your memory. I invite you to remember your desert times. What are they? Perhaps they are times that only you know. Perhaps they are times that you have only shared with one or two people who are closest to you in your life. Find those events in your life this morning and hold them in your memory. For the next few minutes let them come to the front of your mind.

For me, there was a day in September. I was at one of the peaks of my career with a company I used to work for. I had just been transferred and my family had not yet come to join me. I was alone that Friday evening and had been at the store until late. I returned to my hotel room and turned on the television. Late in the evening, I fell asleep and was awakened at about 1 AM by a loud pounding on my door.

The night desk keeper was speaking loudly through the door as he pounded on it. There is an urgent phone call from the Burlington Police Department. You need to answer immediately. Groggily, I responded for the clerk to put the call through.

All I could think of was that something had happened at the store. No one else knew where I was except my family and they would have called directly through to the room. There was nothing that came to mind in the next few seconds that would have prepared me for the news I was about to receive. Then, the phone rang. It sounded like a freight train whistle in my ears and I answered it at once to stop the loud noise.

The person on the other end of the line identified herself as a dispatcher from the Burlington Police department and told me in a cold and unemotional tone that I needed to contact my parents in El Dorado, Kansas at once. I pressed the dispatcher for more information but she insisted that all she could tell me was to call home.

In a panic, I hung up the phone and turned on my light. With great haste, I found my wallet and pulled out my calling card. (Do you remember those? Those handy 16 digit

cards the phone company used to give you so you could make long distance calls when you were away from your own phone...those cards that allowed you the privilege while at the same time costing you twice or three times the amount the call would have cost from your home phone?) Hastily, I punched in the numbers to call my parents. (Do you remember those?...those push button phones with a cord connected to the phone and the phone connected to the wall?) After mistakenly entering the number from the calling card at least three times, I finally started to get through.

After only one ring, my dad answered. I asked what was wrong and why they needed to contact me so urgently. In a sobbing voice, my dad said, "Here's your mother." At once mom came on the line and I asked again, this time more impatiently, "Mom, what is wrong?"

Without the sobs, mom answered. "Steve's Gone!"

"What do you mean, Steve's gone," I asked?

"Your brother was killed in a plane crash earlier today," Mom answered. "His plane went down just outside Washington D.C. Can you fly down and identify him and bring him home?"

I had never done anything like this before and had no idea what the procedure was for securing my brother's body but, because of all the traveling I had done, I was a Platinum Club member with the airline I used. I was sure they could help me. I told mom and dad I would take care of it and I hung up the phone.

Suddenly, I was in the midst of a desert. The certainty I knew only a few hours before me was now shadow. The reality of a future that included family and friends, possessions and possibilities for wealth and comfort were in a murky darkness. I found myself in a place where there seemed to be no provision.

The loss of a loved one is a real desert experience for many of us. We know it affects our reality and our perceptions. There are other desert experiences, of course. Homes lost in fire, devastating weather events like the ones facing the Bahamas and the Florida Coast even as we speak. These experiences change us and cause us to look at the world differently.

The temptation is to look at the world and imagine it as a world where only we are affected. We imagine that the tragedy being experienced is only being experienced by us. When we succumb to this temptation, we shut others out and we react in ways that we perceive only to help us. We turn away from family and friends in times of loss. We seek short-cuts to regain that which has been destroyed in fire or flood. We think, if we could only gain the possessions we once had, we can alleviate the trauma caused by the event itself.

Such was the case for the Hebrew people identified by Jeremiah today. They perceived that they were being denied the privilege of being God's chosen people. They wanted all the riches and power that goes with that lofty position. They saw other nations and other kings with far more status than they perceived they had and they wanted what the

others had. They forgot that what they had was of more value than anything they could ever possibly hope for. They forgot the promise that was made to them that they would be the children of the living God!

As a result, they did the unthinkable. They changed gods. In the passage we shared this morning, I urge you to read carefully this verse. Notice as you read that gods are not capitalized, because as Jeremiah reminds us, they are not gods at all but rather cheap substitutes made of metal and wood.

Never-the-less, the people chose to re-define their relationship and relegate the position of "chosen by God" to a lesser place in order to promote themselves and the worldly power and wealth they believed they sought!

As we come to our gospel lesson for today, this is exactly where the Pharisees find themselves...in a position where they are confronted with the promise of the one true God, a promise that offers life in situations where only death seems an option; a promise that offers spring time water in the middle of a desert.

The Pharisees, however are so surrounded by the desert that they cannot see the "Living Water" right in front of them. Just as their ancestors were asked to turn and call on the name of the Lord, so too are they! They just cannot bring themselves to give up the "other gods" they have grown to be so comfortable with. They cannot bring themselves to imagine other possibilities.

As Jesus is walking with them to the house of one of them, they are watching him closely. Why are they watching him so closely? They are watching because in Chapter 13, they were frightened by the overwhelming response exhibited by others at all he was doing. Remember in that story, Jesus healed on the Sabbath and the leaders were angry because he had violated the rules. Others, however lauded his actions because they demonstrated love of one who had not known love for a very long time.

They were watching him closely because they were in the desert and they were afraid. When we lose a loved one or a part of or even all of our possessions, we are frightened...frightened that we will not be able to replace them. We are frightened that we will not be able to survive without them and one possible response to that fear is to make them our "gods." We worship what we long for but do not have.

The Pharisees were watching Jesus closely because they longed for the power He seemed to be taking from them. He was stealing the respect of the people who responded favorably to his compassion, His Grace, His mercy; things they had never received from the Pharisees.

From the desert of fear, they watched, frightened and fainthearted as Jesus demonstrated the possibility of "Living Water" offered even in the deserts of our lives, in ways that allow us to recognize the vanity of what we have substituted for that which is authentic.

They were watching him on that Sabbath and He was watching them. He watched as they chose their seats at the table. He observed that each of them wanted to be seated

in the place of greatest honor. So far into the desert were these men that they had even begun to substitute themselves for "gods" worthy of their own worship. The Pharisees invited lauded themselves to such a great extent that they believed they were the person of greatest distinction at the meal.

Sometimes, we, those of us who possess abundance and dare I say, great wealth, laud ourselves in this same way. We love to be recognized and reminded of how special we are. As a pastor, I must say I enjoy the positive comments I receive at the end of worship. Some are kind enough to come to me at the door and tell me what a good sermon I delivered. Others tell me how much they enjoyed my singing. (I find that particularly flattering...even for just a moment, and then I remember how bad a singer I really am.) The point is that while I do find these things flattering, I often have to fight to remember that I am not the one to be lauded.

When you read carefully this message today, look carefully for the number of times I have quoted scripture and be reminded that I have very carefully tried to share stories that support God's message. The words I speak are not my own. They are words given by God and he alone deserves the praise and the honor. My hope is that when I am tempted to accept the accolades of the congregation, I will remember that I do not deserve a place of honor.

The Pharisees should be my reminder of that this morning and they should be a reminder to any and all who find themselves in similar circumstances. It is easy to wander into the desert wilderness of self-admiration and forget that there is only one who deserves the praise.

We should not be too hard on the Pharisees today, because many of us have been guilty of the same sin. Still...Jesus is looking at them. He watches and wants to remind them in a critical and yet kind way that there is a place at the table for all people and that place does not have to be in the desert of self-promotion.

In a way, Jesus wants us to remember the One who has chosen us. He wants us to acknowledge that the gifts we have, however they are judged by others, are still gifts given to us by God. When we remember this, we will not seek the places of highest honor. We will instead recognize that we as humans, have no place of honor. Rather, all honor goes to God and to God alone!

We might be tempted at this moment to jump to the end of the message today and rightfully count our blessings. We might remember the children's song that invites us to name them one by one...but let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. Ought we really count our blessings? Ought we really?

How many blessings from God are enough for us? How many do we really need before we realize that God has given us more than enough to lead us in from the desert and sit at the table with Jesus?

In the Hebrew tradition of Passover, there is a moment when the participants recognize the magnitude of God's blessing of them. They sing a song of q qsay the word, "dayenu" which is translated, "It would have been enough." They make the observation,

“ if you had only given us the meal to celebrate it would have been enough, if you had only commanded us to put the blood on our doors, it would have been enough; if you had only delivered us from slavery, it would have been enough; if you had only parted the sea, it would have been enough; if you had only led us through the desert, it would have been enough; if you had only given us the promised land, it would have been enough!”

After a couple of verses, you begin to get the idea that any one of God’s blessings would be, should be, is enough for us. God gives us life and hope, purpose and passion! He doesn’t try to keep us from going to the desert. God knows that we need some desert time once in awhile and that when we are ready to return, he meets us there and leads us back to “Living Water” and helps us recognize how much sweeter it tastes as we discover it anew!

We do not need to count our blessings. One would be enough to remind us. Therefore, when we find ourselves in places where we are in a position to be recognized, we can truly humble ourselves and find our way to the place of least recognition.

In this place, we can truly and humbly attend to the needs of others by using the gifts we can acknowledge with all our hearts are gifts from God. We can use these gifts together to bring about the glory of God in all ways and at all times. We can end up in the same place, the place of “Living Water” by recognizing that our gifts are greater together. We are greater together when we humble ourselves and work for the coming of the Kingdom.

Let me illustrate: Those who are reading this message, take a blank sheet of paper. It does not have to be a full sheet. Scrap paper will do. Now work this simple math equation.

1. Pick a number, any number between one and ten
2. Multiply that number by 2
3. Add 8 to the new number
4. Divide that number by 2
5. Subtract your original number from that new number
6. Assign a numerical value to the letters of the alphabet—A=1, B=2, C=3
7. Now, think of a country in Europe that begins with the letter corresponding with your number
8. Look at the second letter of your country name
9. Think of an animal that begins with that second letter.
10. Write that answer down.

At the end of this message, I will have posted your answer. Do not cheat and skip ahead, but be mindful that even though you picked whatever number you wanted to start, we still ended up with the same answer.

God had given us all, many gifts, many blessings and if we all use them together, we can all end up in the same place, in the same Kingdom, at the same table sharing a meal with God!

In fact, the Pharisees who shared this sabbath meal with Jesus unwittingly shared their meal with God on this day.

As Jesus shared the parable with them, he invited them to humble themselves...not artificially, but genuinely. He asked them to recognize the possibility that there might be someone of greater distinction among them and he gave them a way to avoid embarrassment in front of friends and family by coming to the table humbly in the first place.

As we hear this part of the message, we are reminded that we know the rest of the story. We know who Jesus is and we know that it is indeed the "Son of God" in the room, present with people who are his enemies. We can hear, if we listen, the echoes of the 23rd Psalm. "Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of mine enemies." We can realize that Jesus is indeed in the presence of his enemies, and remember that He is the one who deserves the place of honor at the table.

It might help if we know the Hebrew word for "blessing." That word is Baruch. The complete meaning though is more than blessing. It is "kneeling" or bending down. We should be reminded that a long time ago, God bent down, knelt if you will, and blessed the world with the gift of Himself in the form of His son, humbled and taking his place at the lowest end of the table.

This blessing, however will not be forever at the lowest part of the table. One day, every knee will bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ, this one who dines with pharisees and sinners today, this one who dines with us today, this one who offers the prayers of blessing as we break bread together will be acknowledged as our Lord and Savior.

It is this One who offers the prayers we pray this morning at communion. Baruch atta, Adoni, Elohenyu, Meleck ha Olam. Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, King of the universe. This is the prayer at Passover, the last supper, and it is the same prayer, the same blessing, the same words we use as we consecrate the elements of communion. It invites us to know that God is in our midst in the presence of our table and everywhere...inviting us out of our desert and the temptation of other gods and into the green pastures and still waters that will and can become the "Living Water of the One True God, living in us!" Amen!

Answer: Elephant!

In case you are having trouble thinking of a country in Europe that starts with your letter, here is a list.

A

Albania
 Andorra
 Armenia
 Austria
 Azerbaijan

B

Belarus
 Belgium
 Bosnia and Herzegovina
 Bulgaria

C

Croatia
 Cyprus
 Czechia

D

Denmark

• **E**

- Estonia

• **F**

- Finland
- France

• **G**

- Georgia
- Germany
- Greece

• **H**

- Hungary

• **I**

- Iceland
- Ireland
- Italy

• **K**

- Kazakhstan
- Kosovo

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• **L**

- Latvia
- Liechtenstein
- Lithuania
- Luxembourg

• **M**

- Malta
- Moldova
- Monaco
- Montenegro

• **N**

- Netherlands
- North Macedonia (formerly Macedonia)

- Norway

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• **P**

- Poland
- Portugal

• **R**

- Romania
- Russia

• **S**

- San Marino
- Serbia
- Slovakia
- Slovenia
- Spain
- Sweden
- Switzerland

• **T**

- Turkey

• **U**

- Ukraine
- United Kingdom (UK)

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• **V**

- Vatican City (Holy See)