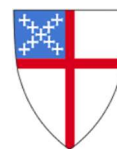




Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

Sermon, the Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner



Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 38:27-32a

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

O Adonai, may your light and truth lead us always, may your generous grace fill us and overflow from us, and may our lives be gifts of nourishment for this world. Speak to us and guide us, we pray. Amen.

Good morning, and Happy Labor Day weekend, everyone! It's that last burst of summer. Enjoy! And this weekend we also remember and give thanks for all workers and for good work.

Our scripture readings next week line up a bit more closely with themes of Labor Day. We'll hear next week from Jeremiah inviting us to the potter's house to see the skilled work of the potter with clay. And we'll hear Paul's very personal letter to Philemon urging good treatment of and dignity to a slave who is now a brother in Christ.

So, before our service began today, we heard the text from the book of Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, one of the books in the Apocrypha, the books written between the Old and New Testament periods. This reading is selected in our Episcopal Church specifically for Labor Day. It reminds us of the gifts of skill and dedicated work of people who make all kinds of things that we use and rely on. This weekend especially, we remember, thank God for, and pray for all who work, at every level of our society. As the reading concluded, "All these rely on their hands, and all are skillful in their own work. Without them no city can be inhabited, and wherever they live, they will not go hungry."

I invite you this weekend especially to be mindful and attentive to every thing that you touch and use, to your food that you eat, to the clothing you put on, to your furniture and home, to any medicine or health aid that you use, to the roads and sidewalks, the boats on the water, the grass and plants in our neighborhoods. Let yourselves think about and imagine the many different workers involved in each thing you touch and eat and wear and use. We depend upon each other, deeply. So, what might *you* write to add to the reading from Sirach about different types of workers in our world involved in anything that makes our cities and communities go, our lives move smoothly? Just like the reading said, "So it is with every artisan... every blacksmith," what might you write? "So it is with every nurse," "So it is with every teacher," "So it is with every road-builder," "So it is with every harvester in the fields." What would you write, to show and honor their work?

As Christians, as followers of Jesus, we are invited and even expected to live with a sense of holy imagination – to see other people around us, each one made in the image of the living God and so giving us a glimpse of a facet God we might not otherwise see – to be curious about the life and depth of each person and of whole groups of people – to put ourselves into their shoes and imagine the work they do and the lives they touch with their hands – to give from ourselves to others as if we were giving to Christ himself, because Jesus said that is exactly what we are doing. The reading from Hebrews today presses us even further, to feel with deep empathy what others are experiencing. Look back at the text. This scripture calls us to "remember those who are in prison, *as though you were in prison with them*; those who are being tortured, *as though you yourselves were being tortured*. Feel their isolation. Feel their pain. And bring that all before the Lord of Light in prayer, and act on their behalf to ease their isolation and pain and to seek their release.

Empathy is at the heart of the Christian life. It is the blood-flow of the follower of Christ Jesus – because it is at the heart of God who came to be Emmanuel, God-with-us, the God who has come close and experienced all our joys and sorrows and pains as one of us.

But true empathy is more than feeling. True empathy involves opening oneself to others as though we were in their shoes, in their skin. And true empathy moves from this “feeling with” to action on behalf of others, as we seek their support and care just as we would for ourselves. The second great commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself – to care for, support, and defend others at least as much as you do for yourself. To feel with, to enter another’s experience and suffer with, serves a purpose – it is to take us toward wiser action with and on behalf of others.

We don’t get to be detached. We give ourselves over to the Holy Spirit, to guide us into sensing and beginning to understand other’s experiences – strengths and weaknesses, joys and pains, sins and sufferings – from the inside, *as though* we ourselves were experiencing the same. You, me, in the fields harvesting tomatoes in the heat under the sun, paid by the crate-load, moving with quick hands and eyes, crouched along the ground. You, me, taking first steps in recovery from addiction to alcohol or cocaine or meth after a series of bad decisions and harsh experiences that sucked us into the imprisonment of addiction. You, me, the single mom at NIC struggling to make ends meet and juggle all the responsibilities of raising children alone while also working two jobs and then daring to take steps forward to gain knowledge and skills for a better career. I can assure you that every chaplain, teacher, staff member, parent, and student at any Episcopal school across this country is praying and bringing deep “feeling with” before God as they have read and seen the news this week of the shooting of innocent children and adults at a Roman Catholic school during their daily worship. With God-graced holy imagination, we step into their shoes and their skin, and we remember them as though we ourselves were experiencing what they are experiencing. We don’t get the luxury of being detached and sitting in the seat of judgment. We don’t get to categorize and pigeon-hole people. We get to walk with them. And, through our empathy, our compassion, our deep “suffering with” through the gift of holy imagination where we cross over from ourselves to others, we move from “feeling with” to “action with and for”.

Detachment is a dangerous path. In Jeremiah today, we hear the prophet speak God’s own words of sorrow, frustration, and anger with God’s people because they have walked away from God, detached themselves from God, become self-absorbed and self-serving, walked away from their own sacred memory of God’s great deeds with their ancestors, and not even entertained the question, “Where is the God who delivered us from cruel slavery and led us through empty and desolate places?” They no longer dove deep into holy remembering, the act of holy imagination that is re-entering the experiences of God’s actions in their history – and so they forgot who they truly were and whose they were.

Jesus takes us further in the journey of holy imagination as well, inviting us with him to see the world as it is and then asking the question, “What if this were all different?” He looks around in a room of people gathered for a banquet, and looks at how people choose their seats or are welcomed and motioned toward their seats. And he sees how much self-positioning there is in this. And then, he opens for everyone in the room a vision of a very different way of gathering at a banquet, and then an even more wildly different vision of hosting a banquet.

Think with me about the way we see seating done at wedding receptions. People with the most distant relationships to the bride and groom – or maybe the least close relationships to their family and friends – tend to have seats at tables furthest from the head table. As the clergy-person officiating at a wedding for a couple I have not known for a long time, I often end up at one of these tables – and I hear stories that I would not otherwise have heard, so it tends to be at least somewhat entertaining!

Or, think with me how airlines handle the boarding of airplanes. People with higher privilege – usually, who have paid more money – get to board first, even if they are up front where everyone later has to file awkwardly by, or in aisle seats through the mid-section of the plane. And, if you’re last in boarding privilege, you likely

have to check your carry-on bag as they run out of room for you. Ugh. It is a flagrant demonstration of privileged entry in order of rank of money paid or points earned – with some exception given for disabled, parents with tots and babies, and those in military service.

Some of you may watch the show, “Myth-Busters,” with two guys and their intrepid team putting cultural myths and ideas to rigorous scientific testing to see if they are true or false. One time, they took on the whole process of boarding planes, and tried a variety of methods to see what was best. You know what method was best, with the shortest boarding time for everyone? The best was random entry – just, everyone comes and loads on the plane at once, finding their assigned seats. Of course, it was also more frustrating because of the pinch-points along the way. The second best method was loading the back and window seats first and progressively moving inward, ending with the aisle seats and front. So, why do we still persist in doing what we are doing, when it is less efficient and generally more frustrating? The way we board airplanes holds up a mirror to us of how we typically function in general in our society in this country. Privilege gets position. Them that’s got shall get, them that’s not shall lose.

Jesus invites the banquet guests – and us – on a pilgrimage of imagination with him. What if we reversed notions of privilege? What if those of us more senior and entitled to recognition took the lesser seats, giving way for people who otherwise wouldn’t get to experience the better seats? Even more than that, what if we started holding banquets for people who never could give such a banquet themselves? What if our dining rooms were filled with folks who were poor, struggling in their lives, disabled, in need... or just plain lonely?

Jesus didn’t just invite people to imagine this. He stated it in the language of a command. “Do this.” When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled and lame, the blind. At the end of our Hebrews reading, we hear a similar tone of command: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

Friends, this weekend, let your imaginations carry you, in the grace of the Holy Spirit, into the lives of others who give of themselves in all sorts of work. Let your imaginations carry you into the lives of people who are unable to work. Let your hearts and minds go out to those who are in any pain or need. And meet Jesus there as you walk with them in their shoes and feel with them in their skin and hold them before God in prayer. And then, listen for what God may prompt you to do in response.

This is at the heart of Christian life – to remember, to see, to feel, and to act with holy imagination. It is along this path, as we then seek to bring what we glimpse by imagination into reality, that we help to bring about bits and pieces of the kingdom of God.