

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller  
The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
23 August 2015

Scripture readings:

1<sup>st</sup> Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43      Psalm 84      Ephesians 6:10-20      John 6:56-69

The lessons are loaded today with lots of things that we could spend time thinking about, but I'm initially interested in the lesson from Kings and when it's talking about where God lives and how the community of faith is going to provide a house for God, a place to put the ark of the covenant - no longer in a cheap tent, but now in a house of cedar and great luxury and beauty and what that might mean to the community with the Word of God underneath the wings of golden angels on top of the box. What fascinates me are these words:

*Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name - for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm - when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then, God, hear in heaven in your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel.*

Have you seen much television lately? Anything political? *[laughter]* Is anybody running for president? If you run for president today in this country, you'd better have an opinion about the border between the United States and Mexico. No matter what it is, you'd better have an opinion. You'd better take a side because that's going to matter in terms of who votes for you.

Even in pre-Christian scripture there is this idea embodied in the Word of God that all of our political demarcations really aren't of divine origin. I've said it before and I'll say it again: I think the first page of scripture might be enough for us for a lifetime. *"The earth is the Lord's, the fullness thereof, the world and everyone who lives in it."* So what kind of hypocrisy is it when northern European people whose ancestors stole this territory from the indigenous people say, *"You have to be legal to live here"* to the people whose ancestors owned it in the first place? It's the problem of a perspective that's too short, a timeline that begins somewhere where we want everything to be right and then from this point and my perspective I will know what's right and wrong.

But the people of Israel are engaged in the business of worshiping God. Now one of the easiest attributes for us all to agree with about God is God is eternal. Or another easy one is God creates the world and God enlivens and gives life to those who occupy the world. And even the people of Israel in this extraordinary text are dealing with the reality that their own prejudices may not be divine, that they have to make room in their temple, in their worship, in their theologies for people who are foreign. Yes! Foreign means a lot of things to us. It means different languages. It means different cultures. It means different cuisines. It means different clothing. It means different ways of doing things, different ways of thinking about things, even different ways of thinking about God, different ways of believing. But Israel had this idea that God was larger than all of those things, and when the community of faith creates a place for worship, the implication is this is God's house. It is a house of prayer, not just for the righteous, not just for the religious, not just for the rule obeyers, not just for "our kind" - for all people. The business of worshiping God is the business of struggling with the question that is asked, and it's a beautiful question and a question we should ask every day: *But will God indeed dwell on the earth?* That's a fundamental question for us to consider today. Will God live here? And as people of faith I think that's another thing that we're probably mature enough to agree on now that God does, in fact, live with us because ever since December of last year we've called her Emmanuel, God with us. And I suppose that one of the major issues with grief, one of the major things we struggle with when those we love dearly and those who love us dearly die, is we are worried, and rightly so, that somehow God has died.

Some of you are old enough to remember the Time magazine cover that was all black in 1960. It simply said God Is Dead. Well, I suppose that's not a bad thing if your concept of God is crippled and small and prejudicial and frightened and exclusive and if what you mean by God is a god who supports me against the rest of the god-damned world. But

that's not what Genesis says. Genesis says the whole world is created by, loved by, and blessed by God and all who live in it, even though they may be foreign, different, speak other languages, have different economies, dress differently and eat food we can't stomach, are nevertheless as much loved by and as much the object of God's love as we come to believe that we are. And long before Jesus was around, in the Book of Kings the struggle begins with how do we deal with the foreigner in our midst. *"Why can't they be like we were, perfect in every way?" [laughter]* Not much difference between foreigners and kids because we're perfect.

I've told you the humorous story of my first parish which was an immigrant parish, no question about it. There were Swedish Americans there who established one of the congregations. There were Germans who were still worshiping in German when I went there in 1975 in a neighborhood that was 90 plus percent Hispanic. And in the church kitchen one Sunday morning a woman very perceptively said, *"Why don't they learn to spick Inklisch the vay vee dit?" [laughter]* Well, they will but it takes a generation. And my usual response to that was, *"Let's go up to Fairview cemetery and dig up all the old Germans and see how many first generation Germans spoke English."*

I have had a struggle for a long time with the biblical understanding of where different languages come from. I don't like the idea of the Tower of Babel, that God was worried about anybody reaching heaven. I think God would welcome us to reach heaven. I do think that differences of language, culture, even age, color, economies, cuisines are God's gift to us so that we don't die of boredom, so that we have something to discuss with each other, so that we have something to *share*, so that we have something to learn to improve our lives rather than keep them the same, so that we might know that God is bigger than what we see in the mirror despite the fact that we believe, teach and confess that we are created in the image and likeness of God. And that's easy to do if we think we're the only ones on this planet. That's called egotism. Or that me and my kind are the only ones who have a right here because it's been 200 years since we stole it! *[laughter]* I mean that's the logic. You do know that the cob of corn you eat this summer is a gift from the indigenous American peoples. You do know that they were here before we were here.

And so we encounter Jesus in the Gospel today talking about feeding - feeding the faithful - about eating. One of the great decisions that I needed to make last week when I was having a glorious time with my older brother. (My mother's dead but she still doesn't believe it - we got along for a whole week, loved each other and it's getting better.) The big decision is what kind of restaurant do you want to eat at tonight? An Italian one, a Mexican one...How shall we be fed? The question that Peter asks Jesus at the end of the gospel today is not, *"Where shall we go?"* after dozens of them deserted, but *"To whom shall we go?"* Now that's a clarification that's not entirely mine. I got that from the pope this morning in Italian. *[laughter]* The question is *who*, not *where*, but *who* will feed us? Now if you ask me, this text from John is certainly the work of the early Church making an argument about the Eucharist. It doesn't take much scratching to figure that out, does it? Of course it is done in a polemic way - comparing the Eucharist to the bread that was fed to the Israelites for forty years in the desert - the manna. They ate manna and they all died, but we're not going to die. They thought they really weren't going to. Big surprise!

But there is a kernel of truth that the message that Jesus gives is that the food that will sustain us in this world has to do with human relationship. What Jesus answers is the question, *"Will God live in this world?"* And Jesus unequivocally says, *"Yes, and you will find her in every human relationship you have which is one that is born of, exists and enjoys the interchange of love."* We struggled with that a little bit yesterday at the wedding when two human beings who've loved each other for over three decades finally have the approbation of the Church, society and the state to say that what we enjoy together here is, in fact, of divine origin. Who are you to say it is not? And that feeds us, that gives us life. And you would take life from me because you're proving your love is really pretty insufficient if you have to beat me up so you can feel better about yourself.

And Jesus is suggesting, I think, more than a sacramental argument but the sacramental argument will be good enough for us - that what the sacrament teaches us and embodies among us is that we are fed here in this place - meaning the Church as it gathers - with ideas that are larger than politics, larger than fear, larger than prejudice, larger than difference, and that by God in our relationships with each other we are fed a language and a belief in something that is confident rather than afraid, that is loving rather than prejudicial, that is mutual rather than self-preserving, that is whole rather than fractured, that is inclusive rather than exclusive, that is loving rather than hateful.

I did see a sign on a Lutheran Church in Florida announcing a Bible Study on human sexuality and I thought if they have to talk about it, I know what their opinion is. Rather than I don't care, bring your relationship with God to us

because ours can be filled by the addition of yours. Ours can be completed and expanded and juiced up by yours. So what kind of restaurant would you like to go to this morning? There is a kind of Christianity that will say, *"This is the only kind of food we eat and ours is the right spice and ours is the only chef who can prepare it, and ours is the only kind of food that's good for you."* But I hear Jesus this morning saying, *"I intend to feed you with myself."* And what is it that Jesus is? Well, when we get to the creed of the Church we will say together that Jesus is God dwelling on earth. *"We believe in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary..."* That's us saying that we believe that Jesus is God incarnate, in flesh, living here and now. Don't you dare put a period at the end of that sentence because the creed goes on to talk about the Church and those who are baptized. Now you get out all those pocket mirrors and compacts and start to look at yourselves and say, my baptism implies that I am a part of Jesus and my perspective is longer than the perspective of my nation, my perspective is longer than the perspective of my culture, my perspective is longer than my ability to speak one or another language, my perspective is longer than my cuisine or my couture, that we as members of the Body of Christ who believe, teach, profess and proclaim that we make up a mosaic that makes Christ present and visible in this world, have a perspective larger than politics and it is a Christian perspective - and by that I mean not a hijacked sense of Christianity.

I said a very unkind thing in an email to my friends Jack and Ruth in South Jersey. Jack retired as a Lutheran pastor when I did and we were emailing back and forth and I said, *"I just passed a couple of large churches which contain a few small ideas."* [laughter] Prejudicial on my part - yeah. Blinkered - perhaps. But you know what I'm after.

The love of God is greater than all of our prejudices. The love of God is greater than our fear. The love of God is greater than our hatred. The love of God speaks every language in the world.

One thing about American imperialism that sticks in my craw no end is the attitude that *they* should learn English when they come here. Any Puerto Ricans here? Thank you, Ben. And what's your native language in Puerto Rico? Spanish. And what kind of passport do you travel under? An American passport. It's just when we imperialize and we deal in concepts of little people in small islands and no accountability. That's not a real language then. You're not real people. And since we walked over them, they have to learn our ways rather than... Do you get it?

And then when I travel in Europe and as a matter of course people speak two or three different languages because they travel the distance of a state and they're in another country, another politic, another economy, another... The American attitude to me seems so poor that I really should learn to speak another language. That should be a joy, a privilege, and open a door rather than close one. I had a Spanish teacher in West New York who was a Bulgarian woman who lived in Argentina for forty-six years and used to belly me into a corner and keep me up until one o'clock in the morning babbling Spanish at me. She said to me one day, *"Don't think if you learn this language that it's going to make you any friends."* She understood the prejudice and she wanted me to be aware of it.

But as Christian people none of this should matter much because our perspective is longer. We, pursuant to the ancient tradition, believe, teach, and confess in a Creator God who loves the creation and all of us in it. And Jesus assures us that as we love each other we will see God present with us and we will have less to fear when we grieve because we will know through the presence of others that God continues to live here, now, in this world today.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.