

World Communion
Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
World Communion Sunday
October 4, 2015
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Text: Hebrews 1 & 2

I don't really understand any of the Scripture passages that we've read today! That may not be the most encouraging start to a sermon that you've ever heard – and I'm not trying to be flippant about it – but thought that perhaps you might have felt something of the same thing as you heard these passages today – I mean, did you know what to make of them all?

- Job – well, Job – that is a book of the Bible, a story, that has long intrigued and confounded people of faith and people without faith or who struggle with faith too. And today we heard the ingredients of that intrigue and confounding – good & evil, faith/sin/suffering, God & Satan – Job in the midst of it all, or more pointedly Job seemingly a pawn in the midst of it all. Let's try the next passage.

- Hebrews – well, Hebrews reads like some sort of PhD thesis on theology that requires a guided scholarly tour to make your way through it. I have nothing at all against PhDs and scholars - I'm in favor of them! - but a text like this can make for rather tough going with its intricate arguments and abundant references. Let's try the next passage.

- Mark – well, there Jesus discusses divorce and adultery...always popular sermon topics! – and then Jesus blesses some children. Maybe I should just go with that last part... ☺

So – I just thought that the fraught-ness of these passages should be acknowledged – and with those challenging options before us, I'm going to go with...door #2 – the passage from Hebrews – I'm hoping I can flesh out something meaningful for us there. And part of why I want to focus there this week is because of our worship service last week.

Last Sunday in the liturgy for this 11o'clock service, there was a time of prayers for God's healing – prayers seeking God's healing were written on cards and people came forward with those prayers to receive a blessing, anointing of oil. Perhaps you weren't here last week or if you were perhaps you did not have particular prayers for healing to offer – my point in bringing this up isn't

to make anyone feel left out. But what I did experience in worship last week as many prayers were written and many people were blessed and anointed, was a profound sense of the many needs that are present in our lives as individuals and as a community, and the deep faith expressed in bringing those needs before God in an intentional way. And that sense was renewed and deepened in me this past Wednesday morning when Andrew Spidahl and Sharon (Rev. Arendshorst) and I gathered together to pray through all of those prayer cards. So many situations of brokenness and need that were expressed: personal pains and struggles; physical illness and mental illness; the struggle and brokenness of loved ones – family and friends; needs for guidance and hope; grief and loss; concern for the vulnerable in our community and world; seeking reconciliation and peace in personal and relational and global ways; many people providing care in difficult circumstances. So many needs – I felt the heaviness and pain of it – the brokenness present in so many was in peoples' lives – ‘Lord, have mercy’; AND I felt too the faith and courage of it – the persistence of love and grace; and I felt too the Spirit of God in it – the presence of God’s gifts of strength and life, of encouragement and guidance, of wholeness and life, of healing peace.

So, I just want you to hold that sense of all that was present there – in that liturgy last week and in the prayers – hold that as we look further at Hebrews. Go through that passage and here are the kinds of phrases that I surmise typically catch our ear: ‘Jesus made purification for sins’- ‘the suffering of death’ – ‘the one who sanctifies’ – and those phrases lead us to think of the theological theme of our sins being forgiven by God through the death of Christ – that is there and that is important. But what I also want to attune our ears to in this passage are some other themes, some additional threads to hear: ‘the Son of God creates and sustains all things’ – ‘God looks on humanity with glory and honor’ – ‘the Son of God tastes death for us’ – ‘the Son enters into suffering’ – ‘Jesus claims us as sisters and brothers’. What is found in this thread is an emphasis on God in Christ entering into human life and history in a way that both affirms the goodness of humanity and that embraces the suffering present in human life – that is there and is important too. But it seems to me that we don’t as often hear or see or say that this thread is as important. God in Christ forgives our sins – yes; God in Christ affirms the goodness of humanity and stands in

solidarity with suffering – yes too. And here's the thing, maybe you hold those threads together, or maybe we can learn to do so – but I am convinced that the typical person on the street would much sooner characterize the church as a purveyor of forgiveness rather than a companion in suffering.

And I think that's a problem – because although there is a lot of sin in the world, there is a lot of suffering too, and isn't it important that the church, our faith, be seen as just as relevant there? Sometimes it seems to me that compassion is an add-on to our theology- that we can say that God cares about people after we deal with forgiveness; but Hebrews does no such thing. It's really quite amazing the claims that are made in this passage – think of it: this is a time when there is just a fledgling Christian community in the Roman world – but Hebrews speaks in grand terms of Christ of holding and blessing all of creation, of entering into death for all, of calling humanity his brothers and sisters. That could sound delusional, but I would instead say it is a word about world communion: the good news of the Christ is God proclaiming a word of profound communion with God's creation – God encountering sin with forgiveness and speaking into suffering the power of resurrection life.

For us to observe and celebrate a World Communion Sunday is partly a time to give thanks for the worldwide church we are a part of – joining together with all peoples at the table of our Lord. But it strikes me that it is also a time to be renewed in our calling to be in communion with our world – not just as a purveyor of forgiveness, but also in suffering: an expression of our Lord who is present to and in the places of suffering and death in our world; the church as a community of faith that affirms human dignity through the good news of God reaching out in Christ with a word of healing to this broken world.

As our Lord invites us to the table for communion, we are nourished by the gifts of God's grace – forgiveness and healing, purpose and dignity. I pray that as people of faith we may be more fully known by such life-giving gifts in our communion with those around us. To be with others in need, to be present to others in suffering; to trust in God as healer, as hope; to believe with and for others that in the face of suffering and death, Christ offers God's word of life – this

too is our calling as followers of Jesus Christ, our communion with all God's children. Thanks be to God. AMEN.