Second Sunday in Lent – St. David’s, Bean Blossom

February 28, 2021

Readings: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Brendan O’Sullivan-Hale

There is a tendency among Christians of a progressive stripe

to dismiss Paul the apostle.

That makes sense.

Among the more infamous positions he takes in his letters

are admonitions for women to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22-23)

and stay silent in church (1 Cor. 14:34).

He tells slaves to obey their masters (Eph. 6:5).

A verse from the first chapter of the Letter to the Romans

has been used to justify discrimination and violence

against LGBTQ people for generations (Rom. 1:26-27).

So It can be tempting to tune out the excerpt

of Paul’s letter to the Romans

that comes some three chapters later than that infamous verse

that we read this morning.

Adding on to whatever preconceived notions

we have about Paul,

it’s grammatically convoluted,

with awkward parenthetical phrases

and twisting sentences,

packed with scriptural citations.

It’s hard to follow on the page,

harder still when read aloud,

and yet harder when taken out of context.

But I’m going to stick with it this morning.

Because Paul’s greatest hits also include such soaring phrases as,

“Love is patient; love is kind,” (1 Cor. 13:4)

and dazzling visions of inclusion such as,

“There is no longer Jew or Greek;

There is no longer slave or free;

there is no longer male or female,

but all are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28)

That the author of that passage

also told women to be silent in church

is indeed a contradiction.

But I’m not sure Paul’s internal contradictions

are any more unusual than our own.

His hangups may have been different from ours,

but mostly I think he’s a human,

with all the frailties of the human condition,

trying mightily to grasp the divine.

When Paul met Jesus on the Road to Damascus

and was converted from a vicious persecutor of Christians

to a follower of Jesus,

not a word of the book we now know as the New Testament had been written.

The development of the Nicene Creed was still centuries away.

The knowledge that informed Paul as he wrote letters

encouraging or excoriating Christian communities

(often doing both in the same letter)

came from his encounter with the risen Christ,

deep knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures,

regular participation in the Eucharist,

and living in Christian community.

When we read Paul, we do well not just to consider the words on the page,

but the man writing them,

a sometimes irritable

itinerant tentmaker

with terrible handwriting (Gal. 6:11),

working out his own salvation

with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12),

struggling to understand the Gospel

he had given his life to.

So, about this morning’s reading.

Here, Paul is beginning to lay the groundwork

for a sustained theological argument that will last

for eight more chapters.

Paul is trying to work out a number of things in these chapters:

whether Christians have displaced Israel as God’s chosen people

(the short answer is no) –

the continued relevance or lack thereof of

the practice of circumcision and the Law codified in the Torah;

the ultimate plan of salvation,

and a practical question of inclusion,

namely:

who gets to participate in the church,

and on what terms?

To answer these questions,

Paul reaches back to the promise God made to Abraham

that he would be the father of many nations.

The passage of Genesis we read this morning

is not the first time God makes this promise.

It is at least the fourth.

Some years earlier,

God made the same promise,

coming to Abraham in a vision,

pulling him out of his tent and placing him under

a star-drenched sky.

God challenged Abraham to count the stars,

assuring him that his children would be as numerous.

And Abraham believed.

And God rewarded that trust, by treating it as righteousness (Gen. 15:1-6).

This is important to Paul

because this incident occurs

years before God institutes the practice of circumcision,

and generations before the institution of the Levitical code,

or even the ten commandments.

And so, Paul reasons,

while the commandments and the law

are intended to foster

right behavior and right relationships

between God and humanity,

humans among each other,

and between humans and creation,

they are not preconditions for such a right relationship to exist.

And further,

righteousness in God’s eyes comes not through

lack of sin

or remarkably good character,

but through trust.

Righteousness, then, is not self-generated,

but God-given

This is good news,

during this introspective season of Lent,

because we know, if we look hard at ourselves,

that we cannot attain divine perfection

under our own power.

I won’t presume to speak for you,

but I can tell you that within my marriage

my annoying and petty habit

of trying to be right about every little thing

has nothing to do with divine righteousness,

to say nothing of my more consequential failings

as a husband and human at large.

To be a member of the household of God

and to join Abraham’s lineage

requires not a particular bloodline

nor inherent goodness

nor noble acts,

but trust

in the faithfulness, grace, and mercy of God.

I won’t take you through all of Paul’s reasoning,

because Paul himself takes eight more chapters to do it,

but this premise,

that we cannot be worthy of salvation on our merits alone,

but only through trust in God,

is the basis for Paul’s most expansive vision of inclusion,

where he states that the universal anguish of the human condition

has a divine purpose, namely,

that God may be merciful to all (Rom. 11:32).

Today, we,

this gathered group of believers,

trace our spiritual ancestry to Abraham

through a lineage of trust.

Standing with God, outside at night,

underneath the Milky Way,

Abraham trusted God’s promise to make him the father of many nations,

his descendants as numerous as the stars.

But God makes another promise at the same time,

that Abraham will not live to see its fulfilment:

“As for yourself,” God says, “You will go to your ancestors in peace.” (Gen. 15:15)

Within this context Jesus’s promise in this morning’s gospel

that he will suffer and die,

and by the way his followers need to be prepared to take up their cross, too,

may make more sense to us than it did to Peter in the moment.

This comes on the heels of the disciples recognizing Jesus as the messiah (Mk. 8:27-29);

Jesus immediately dashes the disciples’ hope for a conquering hero,

but foreshadows a more difficult road.

The teaching is as comprehensive as it is uncomfortable.

Like Paul finding within the mire of sin

the infinite mercy of God,

in the universal experience of death,

Jesus locates the possibility of a different kind of life.

In saying “those who want to save their life will lose it,

and those who lose their lives for my sake…will save it,”

Jesus says that there is a higher moral value than self-preservation.

In some times and places this teaching has been interpreted

as encouraging martyrdom,

but even in these waning days of Christendom in this country,

that scarcely applies to us, now.

Consider instead, why Jesus anticipates his death.

From the moment of his baptism, Jesus has been wandering Israel,

showing what a life lived for others looks like,

a life grounded in prayer and spent

healing the sick (Mk. 1:21-34; 2:1-12; 3:1-6; 5:1-12, 21-43; 7:24-37)

feeding the hungry (Mk. 6:30-43; 8:1-9),

giving mercy to the outcast (Mk. 2:15-17; 5:1-12, 25-34; 7:24-30)

He demonstrates that God is in solidarity

not with the powerful or those society accords respect,

but with the very people most harmed

by accumulation and self-preservation at the top.

Jesus points out,

“What will it profit [you] to gain the whole world and forfeit [your] life?”

A life lived with self-preservation as the goal will inevitably fail.

That kind of life has no meaning beyond itself.

Death comes for us all; at best you stall for a while.

A life lived following Jesus, though,

has at its heart the greater purposes of God:

justice, mercy, healing and wholeness.

Live that kind of life,

and you will shine like one of the stars overhead

when God made that covenant with Abraham all those years ago.

Trust that

by following Jesus

all the way to the door through which he went,

and through which we all must one day go,

there waits the infinite love of God,

“who gives life to the dead,

and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” (Rom. 4:17)

In the name of that one, holy, and living God. Amen.