**St. David’s Episcopal Church**

Bean Blossom, Indiana

Pentecost 5, Independence Day

**Sermon by the Rev. Kate Wilson**

Deuteronomy 10:17-21 Psalm 145:1-9 Hebrews 11:8-16 Matthew 5:43-48

Psalm 19: 14 May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

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Welcome to those of you whose roads were cleared of debris by Nashville Town government or INDOT in time to get here. Or whose power came back in time to get your garage doors open. For those whose roads have not been cleared, or whose power outages did not allow you to drink coffee or shower, welcome to our Zoom service!

It isn’t often these days that I open my sermon with a psalm verse, and this one a plea that my words and meditation be pleasing in God’s sight. I use verse 14 from Psalm 19 because I struggled with this message. There is no doubt about the messages of our Scriptures today, and it is Paul’s letter that gives us a good bit of context and also caused my struggle, a struggle between the Good News and the politics of today’s America, the irony between the history of the people of Israel and the people of the United States today.

The Good News is so very clear!

17For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, 18who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. 19You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. 20You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. 21He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen.

…Who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. God is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen…

From Psalm 145:

8The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, \*
       slow to anger and of great kindness.
9The Lord is **loving to everyone** \*
       and his compassion is over all his works.

So far, so good! We are to abandon all the gods other than the one God, the father of Jesus Christ. We are not to be distracted by the gods of fame and power and addiction, or the god of self-doubt and despair, those gods that distract us from the true God. And we are to do that because God is gracious and full of compassion, has given us everything and is loving to **everyone.** We can be lost among those other temptations, that’s the challenge, but I’m down with this idea, as I know you are as well.

And from the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus ups the ante:

43“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?  Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Now it’s getting trickier. Praying that God will bless you, those you love **and** those you have difficulty loving! Now our Christianity is giving us some pushback, demanding a little bit more effort.

And that is **still** all good.

So what’s the struggle I’m having, on this week of our independence? What’s gnawing at me, when so many will preach that America is the promised land, given to us, the chosen people for God’s glory, and, I guess, for our glory as well, and that we should simply thank God for God’s generosity and goodness to us, and get on with being free Americans?

It’s the echoes from the past that gnaw at me. History’s past and, more specifically, our American past **and our American present.**

8By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents.

That’s my first red flag. They were living in tents in the land they were promised. But guess what? Other people were already living there. From Abraham’s point of view, and that of his heirs, that was their God-given right. They lived peacefully with those whose land it was, for a time, believing always that it was their land, their gift from God. Does that sound familiar?

That has been a belief here in this “New World” for hundreds of years. We did not live in peace for long. People made good use and a good excuse of OUR GOD as our reason to vanquish the people who were here. And we overlooked that, as millions died. I cannot overlook that little hiccup in our history.

Paul continues…

They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

What happens here is that we grab part of the sense of this passage to say we welcome the poor, those searching for a better country. We say that Emma Lazarus captured this purely and beautifully in her sonnet, “The New Colossus”, when she wrote the words of Liberty:

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

That is a beautiful thing, the American Dream, step one! God bless THIS America.

The problem is, we don’t do it anymore.

The problem of immigration is enormous, and the effort to address it is blocked over and over again. And that breaks my heart. The heartache of the suffering is enormous. And I feel like the little kid who is frantically throwing starfish back into the sea. So little impact. Is it worth it? What can I do?

And so I get into that despair of a problem that is just to huge for ME to handle, and how arrogant it is to believe that I could handle it alone. Of course I can’t. But we can, with the starfish in front of us.

I read a little bit about Emma Lazarus during the course of writing this sermon. She was more than a poet. She was an activist. She wrote the poem to raise money NOT for the entire Statue of Liberty, but for the base. Just the base, the base to stand it on. And she also started a technical school in New York to teach trades to the thousands of Jewish immigrants escaping pogroms. Her own family came to the United States from Brazil, where there were Inquisitions against the Jews. So knowledge of the terror of her homeland was in her DNA, in her heart and soul. So she did what she could. She did not sugarcoat with scripture, her own scripture of Deuteronomy and the Psalms.

Emma Lazarus carried that very good ancient Jewish and, more recently, very Christian message. Do what we can. Love even those we hate, do what God wants. Sometimes it’s just so darned hard to see it clearly.

I asked Donna Niednagel to be here today, and to bring her certificate along with her. I had hoped to find information on her very prestigious award, received on Thursday shortly after they managed to get the kids out of the Pollinator Camp, and getting Donna to the meeting was no small feat, as no one who knew about it was about to tell her in advance. It’s quite a story.

Well, I wasn’t able to find what I wanted about this particular award, but I was able to find a lot of reasons for it.

An article in Our Brown County from July, 2009, saying “Donna is a local legend. She’s a tiny woman, but if you believe people in the local community, she has shoes the size of oil tankers.” It goes on to cite her work with Guardian Ad Litem, which she retired being Director for, in order to put more energy into the Transit Committee, affordable housing, and work she did not even see coming way back in 2009. Such as the Weekend Backpacks.

I found a photo of the donation of a check from People’s State Bank to the Weekend Backpack brigade.

“Volunteering has brought meaning, purpose and joy, and recognition that only by working together can we make this a better world for our children and grandchildren,” she explains.

I also found a St. Vincent DePaul newsletter published in 2020, during the height of the pandemic. Donna was there. And here is something that will not surprise you. So were Bob and Yvonne Oliger, John and Angie Aumage, Sandy Ackerman, Maggie Linscott, and Jennifer Heller, cheerfully emptying an enormous truck-worth of food through the County Food alliance.

That, my friends, is the Gospel call. That is the response to the gifts God rains down on those we love and those we have difficulty loving. That is the response in gratitude for and in furthering of our independence. I congratulate Donna on this long-earned award, and all of you for your gifts of heart, soul, treasure, and muscle for God’s people.

Thanks be to you, and thanks be to God!