

**TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: PROPER 15A**

Genesis 45:1-15

Psalm 133

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15: (10-20) 21-28

**August 17, 2014**

The Fork Church

Doswell, Virginia

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ONE OF THE JOYS OF BEING RETIRED IS HAVING THE TIME TO SPEND DOING THINGS THAT I COULD NOT DO WHEN I WAS WORKING AS A PRIEST. OF COURSE, RETIREMENT IS AN ADJUSTMENT – A DIFFERENT PACE. IT MEANS SURRENDERING TO THE REALIZATION THAT ONE IS GROWING OLDER – THAT ONE MUST STEP BACK FROM RESPONSIBILITIES AND PLACES OF RECOGNITION AND AUTHORITY. BUT RETIREMENT IS ALSO A TIME WHEN THERE IS TIME AND OPPORTUNITY FOR NEW THINGS AND NEW ACTIVITIES. THE BEAUTY OF THIS PERIOD IN MY LIFE IS THAT I AM ABLE TO DO SOME VERY DIFFERENT THINGS – THINGS THAT I MIGHT NOT HAVE IMAGINED 10 OR 15 YEARS AGO.

FOR EXAMPLE, DURING THE FIRST WEEK OF AUGUST, I PARTICIPATED IN AN ICON WORKSHOP AT ST. STEPHENS CHURCH, RICHMOND. EACH DAY OF THAT WEEK, WE BEGAN AT 8:10 WITH MORNING PRAYER IN THE CHAPEL, FOLLOWED BY COFFEE, AND THEN HEADED UPSTAIRS TO THE ICON ROOM. THERE ONE OF THE STAFF CLERGY LED PRAYERS AND ANOINTED OUR HANDS WITH OIL FOR THE WORK AHEAD. NEXT WE BEGAN OUR WORK, THAT OF WRITING OR PAINTING AN ICON. THIS YEAR WE HAD 3 CHOICES. I CHOSE THE ARCHANGEL MICHAEL. OTHERS SELECTED THE ARCHANGEL GABRIEL, AND STILL OTHERS, ST. STEPHEN.

IT IS A PRAYERFUL PROCESS AND WE WORK MOSTLY IN SILENCE – WITH RECORDED MONASTIC CHANTS AND HYMNODY. OUR WORK ON THE ICONS IS DONE WITH THE AWARENESS OF THE GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THAT GOD IS AT WORK IN EACH OF US. EVEN THE IMPERFECTIONS ARE A GIFT OF GOD. NO TWO ICONS WILL BE ALIKE.

WE BEGAN WITH A CLEAN WHITE ICON BOARD – SPECIALLY PREPARED. THE WHITE BOARDS REPRESENT CHAOS – IN THE SENSE THAT THE BOARD IS OPEN TO ANYTHING IN THE CREATED WORLD. WE BEGAN TO REIGN IN THE CHAOS BY TRANSFERRING AN IMAGE TO IT –

THUS SETTING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE PROJECT. THROUGHOUT THE WEEK, WE PAINTED LAYER UPON LAYER OF COLOR. AFTER EACH LAYER OF PAINT WE ADD A FLOAT. A FLOAT IS A VERY THIN WATERY PAINT THAT IS PUSHED, NOT BRUSHED. IT CHANGES AND INTEGRATES INTO THE PAINT IN A MARVELOUS WAY. ON FRIDAY, WE WERE ABLE TO REDRAW THE LINES, ADD LIFE GIVING LINES AND PUT IN THE INSCRIPTIONS. THERE ARE RULES TO FOLLOW. THE COLORS TO BE USED ARE PRESCRIBED AT EACH STEP. SOMETIMES IN OUR HASTE OR LACK OF ABILITY, WE MAKE MISTAKES. THERE IS ALWAYS REDEMPTION IN THE NEXT STEP.

OUR TEACHER SUZANNE IS PATIENT AND ENCOURAGING. SHE HELPS WHEN WE GET IN A “PICKLE” AND CAN NOT FIGURE OUT WHAT TO DO. SHE GETS US BACK ON TRACK. AS SHE SAYS OFTEN, “IN THE NEXT STEP THERE IS ALWAYS FORGIVENESS, REDEMPTION, AND RESURRECTION!” BY FRIDAY AFTERNOON OUR ICONS WERE COMPLETE! AFTER THE ICONS HAVE DRIED SUFFICIENTLY, IN THREE WEEKS OR SO, WE WILL PRESERVE THEM WITH A COAT OF SHELLAC, THEN VARNISH, FOLLOWED BY A POLISHING WITH LEMON OIL.

LIKE WRITING AN ICON, TODAY’S LESSONS ARE ABOUT GOD’S WORK IN OUR LIVES. THE APOSTLE PAUL WROTE IN ROMANS “THE GIFTS AND THE CALLING OF GOD ARE IRREVOCABLE. GOD IS MERCIFUL TO ALL”. (Romans 11:29,32) I SEE MY PARTICIPATION IN THE ICON CLASS AS A CALL AND GIFT OF GOD. FOR YEARS, I HAD LOOKED WITH DESIRE AT THE ICON WORKSHOP HELD EVERY YEAR AT KANUGA – THE EPISCOPAL CAMP AND CONFERENCE CENTER IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA. BUT MY WORK IN THE CHURCH AND ITS DEMANDS MADE TAKING A WEEK OFF AT THE BEGINNING LENT ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE – AND IT WAS VERY EXPENSIVE! NOW, BEING RETIRED, I AM ABLE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS SAME WORKSHOP RIGHT HERE IN RICHMOND. I SEE THAT YEARNING SO LONG AGO HAVING FLOWED INTO A CONCRETE REALITY. THIS OPPORTUNITY AT ST. STEPHENS TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS SAME COURSE IS TRULY A GIFT FROM GOD! HAVING FINISHED MY FIFTH ICON, I DO BELIEVE IT IS A PART OF WHAT I’M TO DO IN THIS PERIOD OF MY LIFE.

THE APOSTLE PAUL WRITES “THE GIFTS AND THE CALLING OF GOD ARE IRREVOCABLE. GOD IS MERCIFUL TO ALL”. (Romans 11:29,32) SOMETIMES THOSE THINGS GOD PUTS ON YOUR HEART MAY NOT BE APPROPRIATE AT THE MOMENT, BUT IN TIME – IF GOD IS CALLING YOU TO SOMETHING, I BELIEVE THAT THE POSSIBILITY WILL OPEN UP – WHEN THE TIME IS RIPE. GOD IS ALWAYS MERCIFUL AS WE BUMBLE ALONG IN OUR LIVES.

ICON WORK IS A FORGIVING PROCESS. SO IS STORY OF JOSEPH TODAY. WHEN JOSEPH’S BROTHERS CAME SEEKING FOOD, JOSEPH, SECOND IN POWER ONLY TO THE PHARAOH OF EGYPT, MET IN FULL EGYPTIAN REGALIA. IN THE PROCESS, HE REVEALED HIMSELF TO HIS 11 BROTHERS. “I AM YOUR BROTHER JOSEPH WHOM YOU SOLD INTO EGYPT.” (Genesis 45:4b) THE BROTHERS WERE SHAKEN AND SPEECHLESS. THEY KNEW WHAT THEY HAD DONE TO JOSEPH SO LONG AGO. REMEMBER

THE BROTHERS THREW JOSEPH IN A PIT TO DIE,

ONE BROTHER RESCUED HIM BY SELLING HIM TO A CARAVAN GOING TO EGYPT.

IN EGYPT, JOSEPH WAS SOLD AS A SLAVE TO THE CAPTAIN OF PHARAOH’S GUARD.

HE WAS ACCUSED OF TRIFLING WITH THE CAPTAIN’S WIFE AND THROWN IN JAIL.

BECAUSE OF HIS DREAMS HE CAME TO PHARAOH’S ATTENTION AND THE REST IS HISTORY!

JOSEPH COULD REMAINED IN HIS DISGUISE, HE COULD HAVE IGNORED HIS BROTHERS, HE COULD HAVE PUNISHED THEM AND THROWN THEM IN PRISON OR WORSE, BUT INSTEAD HE CHOSE TO FORGIVE THEM. JOSEPH’S STORY IS ONE OF FORGIVENESS. AS PSALM 133 SAYS, “Oh, how good and pleasant it is when brethren live together in unity” Ps 133:1

FORGIVENESS IS CENTRAL IN CHRISTIANITY. WE ARE PEOPLE WHO FOLLOW THE WAY OF JESUS CHRIST. NONE OF IS PERFECT. FORGIVENESS IS ESSENTIAL IN OUR EVERYDAY LIVES – AT HOME, AT SCHOOL, AT WORK, HERE IN THE PARISH. LIKE JOSEPH WE ARE CALLED TO LET OF HURTS AND ANGER – FORGIVING AS JESUS FORGAVE. TODAY’S PSALM REMINDS US OF THE GREAT BENEFIT OF FORGIVENESS IS brethren living together in unity! Ps 133:1

IN ICON WRITING WE'RE CALLED TO LET GO OF IMPERFECTIONS AND A FEELING OF INADEQUACY. SOME PEOPLE TAKE THE WORKSHOP ONLY ONCE. I THINK FOR SOME IT TOO DIFFICULT TO RELAX AND LET THE PROCESS FLOW. SOMEHOW THE PRESSURE TO EXCEL PUSHES THEM TO A POINT WHEN THEY CANNOT LET THE PROCESS HAPPEN. IN A WAY IT'S LIKE FORGIVENESS – LETTING GO OF OUR NEED TO DO IT WELL AND PERFECTLY, LETTING GO OF OUR IMPERFECTIONS AND THE IMPERFECTIONS OF OTHERS, LETTING OUR ICON BE AN EXPRESSION OF GOD WORKING THROUGH US. THAT IS THE WAY LIFE IS TOO.

IN TODAY'S GOSPEL, JESUS COMES TO GRIPES WITH A BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S CALL ON HIS LIFE. NO LONGER IS HE JUST TO BE CONCERNED WITH THE JEWS – HIS PEOPLE, BUT HE IS TO REACH OUT TO POOR, SICK AND NEEDY WHEREVER THEY ARE. THE CANAANITE WOMAN BECOMES A PRIME EXAMPLE OF THIS PUSH TOWARD OPENNESS – TOWARD A BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S MISSION IN THE WORLD. AGAIN, AND AGAIN, JESUS SAID, "THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND – AMONG YOU". YET IT TOOK THE CANAANITE WOMEN'S PERSISTENCE BEGGING JESUS TO HEAL HER DAUGHTER TO BRING THIS HOME TO JESUS. HIS CALL WAS TO ALL PEOPLE.

ICON WRITING HAS BROADENED ME, OPENED ME UP TO NEW WAYS OF SEEING THINGS – DETAILS – PEOPLE'S FACES, LIGHT AND SHADOWS AS WELL AS DIFFERENT EXPRESSIONS OF OUR FAITH. IT HAS CALLED ME INTO MORE SILENCE. IT HAS GIVEN ME AN APPRECIATION OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH – ITS MUSIC, ITS ART, ITS WAY OF SEEING GOD AT WORK.

IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY, THE CANAANITE WOMAN SETS AN EXAMPLE OF PERSISTENCE. ICON WRITING CAN SEEM HARD AND DIFFICULT. IT TAKES PERSISTENCE TO KEEP PUSHING FORWARD. FOLLOWING JESUS TAKES "STICK-TO-IT-NESS" TOO.. IT IS NOT AN EASY PATH – BUT THIS IS YOUR CALL AND MINE. AS YOU PREPARE TO RECEIVE NIK, YOUR NEW PRIEST BOB AND I PRAY YOU WILL BE OPEN TO HIS LEADERSHIP. PRACTICE FORGIVENESS, PERSIST IN LOVING ONE ANOTHER, AND BE OPEN TO THE NEW THINGS THAT GOD HAS FOR YOU.

IN A WAY, FORK CHURCH IS LIKE A FRESH ICON BOARD. A NEW IMAGE IS ABOUT TO BE ETCHED ON IT. THINK OF YOUR VARIOUS MINISTRIES AND PERSONALITIES AS THE COLORS OF AN ICON. REALIZE THAT ALL WILL NOT BE PERFECT, BUT IF YOU EACH FLOAT LOVE, FORGIVENESS, AND TRUST UPON EACH OF THE MINISTRIES AND ONE ANOTHER, THE ICON THAT IS FORK CHURCH WILL BE BEAUTIFUL, UNIQUELY GOD'S WORK, BY GOD'S HAND AND YOURS.

AS YOU GO FORWARD INTO THE YEARS AHEAD,

TRUST IN GOD'S MERCY,

BE OPEN TO NEW THINGS,

LET LOVE ABOUND,

AND ABOVE ALL FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER.

IF YOU DO THIS, FORK CHURCH WILL BE WHAT GOD IS CALLING IT TO BE – A PLACE KNOWN AS A VIBRANT, CARING MINISTRY – THE HANDS AND FEET OF JESUS CHRIST IN THIS COMMUNITY.