

Devotions – May 24-30, 2015
Pastor Julie Belew
Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Baraga, MI

Sunday, May 24 - Pentecost Sunday

Verdant Greening

Text: Ezekiel 37:1-6

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

I love that Pentecost takes place in the Northern Hemisphere in spring time. Our long winters bring with them many days inside more than outside. With less sun our bodies lack energy wanting to stay under the covers longer to hibernate. We may easily feel like a valley of dry bones void of life as Ezekiel describes.

Hildegard of Bingen, of the eleventh century, was a biblical scholar, gardener, musician, preacher, and herbalist. The word of God she wrote "is nothing less than the greening power of God's creating word. The word of God is a power, charged with greenness." So enraptured was Hildegard of God's word speaking forth life that she coined her own word, "verdant greening" - to name this power that overcomes bareness in the earth and in human life. She spoke of Christ as the "green figure" whose mission was to bring "verdant greening" to humans who are "withered" or "dried up".

The word of God in Ezekiel's vision spoke to the dry bones creating flesh, skin, and breath calling forth life. As you breathe in the fresh spring air, rise up out of the valley, renewed and refreshed. Just as the barren earth springs forth life, the greening power of God revives your weary soul.

Can these mortal bones live? Yes, indeed! The Spirit of the living God has been poured out on all flesh breathing life into humans who are "withered" or "dried up."

Let us pray: *God of Life, we thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit that lives and breathes within our mortal bodies. Revive and refresh us. Renew and enliven us. Call forth life in which you take delight. Amen*



Monday, May 25, 2015

Natural Grace

Text: Psalm 104: 14-18; 27-28

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart. The trees are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. The high mountains are for the wild goat; the rocks are a refuge for the coney. These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

Many of us have chosen to live in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan for the sheer pleasure of enjoying God's good earth. We value the months of spring and summer as if they were like the kingdom of heaven. We are passionate about spending as much time as possible in the great outdoors. We cherish the warmth of sunshine even if it is but one ray behind a cloud. We are fortunate to splash in the waters of Lake Superior and her many flowing rivers and waterfalls. It is exhilarating to breathe in the countless aromas of cedar, spring rains, apple blossoms, and trillium. I find it impossible to stand on the ground of mother earth without looking up to the sky in humble gratitude.

How could I eat without the tiny fragile hummingbird pollinating the flowers of the fruit tree? How could I exist without breathing the oxygen exhaled by the mighty maple or oak tree? How could I survive without the rocks of the ancients, full of minerals my body needs?

It all seems undeserved if you ask me... the earth graciously giving in abundance the very things that sustain my existence; the very things that give me life. What have I done to merit such gifts?

Christ often spoke using earthy images in parables and stories. He was present in the creation of the world as John 1:3 tells us that through him all things came into being.

The abundance of God's grace is powerfully present everywhere in and through Christ - via creation and the cross. How could I be a new creation without Christ graciously giving his life for all creatures under the sun? The nature of God is ever present. We are never without grace.

Being grace-conscious is being grateful. Grateful to God for all that has been given to us.

As mystic Meister Eckhart says, "If the only prayer you say in your whole life is thank you - that would suffice."

Let us pray: *God of Grace, "Thank you!"*



Tuesday, May 26, 2015

Text: 1 Corinthians 9:8

**And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance,
so that by always having enough of everything,
you may share abundantly in every good work.**

When Mount St. Helens erupted in May of 1980 it was the deadliest and most economically destructive volcano in the history of the U.S., but today the vastness of the devastation is not visible. Scientists are gaining new insights on the recovery of ecosystems and the resiliency of certain species from this event. Even from loss and devastation, the earth selflessly replenishes, giving and giving, over and over again.

From *Renewing Worship*, Volume 6 we read:

Holy God, Holy One, Holy Three!
You beyond the galaxies, you under the oceans,
you inside the leaves, you pouring down rain,
you opening the flower, you feeding the insects,
you giving us your image.

The giving Spirit of God knows no limitation of time and place offering life and health through, to, and for creation. Year after year the flowers, trees, and bushes reseed themselves offering more flowers, trees, and bushes replenishing and reproducing despite any loss from the year before. In every seed is the promise of thousands of forests.

We, as earth people, were created out of this spiritual law of giving. Created in God's image, surely this notion and viable sense to replenish and give is inherent within us, breathed into us. I often wonder why we are so afraid to give. And it is especially difficult to give when we experience loss and devastation in our own lives.

In this imperfect human world we live in, it is far too easy to doubt rather than allow ourselves to experience God's faith of abundance. When in doubt about giving (time, talent, finances) take time to observe your surroundings. Where do you see selfless acts of giving – through nature, through people, through God's word, in the selfless act of Christ on the cross? I am guessing there is a lot more giving going on than we thought if we only take time to notice.

When Deepak Chopra was a child he was taught to never go to someone's house without bringing something – never visit anyone without bringing them a gift. You may say, "How can I give to others when at the moment I don't have enough myself?" You can bring a flower. One flower. You can bring a note or a card which says something about your feelings for the person you're visiting. You can bring a compliment. You can bring a prayer.

You are a child of God, created in God's image. Inherent within you is God's capacity to give. Giving is not as difficult as you think.

Let us pray: *Gracious God, remove our doubts about who we are. Remove our fear to let go of self. Remove the limitations we place on ourselves. Remind us of the freedom we have in Christ Jesus – free to love and free to give. Amen*



Wednesday, May 27, 2015

Text: Psalm 69: 1-3

**Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.**

There is a small stream that flows deep in the woods within walking distance from our house. In the early spring the water flows rapidly, stirring up all sorts of debris – remains of last year's leaves, sediment from the bottom, and billions of unknown particles swirling and twirling in the current. It looks uninviting to step into and God only knows how deep one would sink into the muck and mire.

Staring into the water of floating debris reminds me of how often the flow of life carries with it turmoil, distress, despair, anxiety, brokenness, and pain. For the Hebrew people, water often was a sign of chaos and disorder. The waters of the deep were dark, unknown, and ominous; the ocean uncontrollable and unpredictable.

When Jesus went down to the river Jordan, he immersed himself into the murky, muddy waters where chaos and disorder dwells. Into the depths of the river, dark and ominous, Jesus felt the current of our lives unpredictable and uncontrollable. As he stepped into the water, the mucky silt and sediment rose up, covering his body in gunk, dirt, and debris. Down in the depths of the water he immersed himself in human suffering – turmoil, distress, despair, anxiety, brokenness, and pain.

Down into the depths of the water Jesus became one of us, knowing what it is to be human. There is comfort in knowing that Jesus goes with us into the very deepest part of our pain, in the deep mire where there seems to be no foothold.

Stuck in the deep muck and mire we cannot save ourselves. God knows this and so God decided to do something about it.

... "for darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1: 2). The heavens opened and a voice is heard, "You are mine." No longer will you remain stuck in the muck and mire. No longer will the water of chaos surround you. I have entered the deep. I have stepped into the most uninviting muck and mire known to humankind. I have come to lift you up and raise you out!

Let us pray: *Faithful God, through your Son Jesus you step into the deep waters of our life embracing us in all our turmoil, distress, despair, anxiety, brokenness, and pain. Through your saving power Noah and the animals survived the flood and the Israelites escaped through the sea. You have saved us and claimed us as your sons and daughters. Thank you for raising us up with Christ and brining us to a place of safety and peace. Amen*



Thursday, May 28, 2015

Text: Mark 6: 41-44

"Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish."

The other day I was talking to a friend who was having difficulty finding balance between faith and practicality. God gave us a brain to use *and* faith to believe. How do we discern and function holding faith and practicality in tension through tough situations?

Tough situations that involve a future outcome like buying a new house; relocating our family for a higher paying job; changing school districts; changing careers. In all these situations we assess and evaluate the information available to us in order to make wise choices. On the other hand, as we process the information at hand the choice isn't always so clear; in fact, many times it is not. There are always pros and cons to any given situation. These are the times we rely on God for faith to move toward in an unforeseeable outcome hoping for the best.

It appears to me the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand demonstrates one of these tough situations. The disciples were trying to be practical with what was available to them to determine what they should do to feed the hungry crowd. Should they send the hungry people away to find food in the neighboring village? Or should they go to the next village, spend a day's wage for bread, and give them something to eat? Or...

We can spend an inordinate amount of time wanting to make the perfect decision not only for the problem at hand, but also for any consequences that might arise in the future.

In the midst of the dilemma, Jesus took what was in front of the disciples (five loaves and two fish) and blessed it. Whatever we are facing, whatever decisions need to be made, put it all in a basket for God to bless. Placing it in God's hands gives the Holy Spirit the opportunity to create a miracle. What comes out of the basket may surprise us. What comes out of the basket may be unexpected. Inviting the blessings of God in our decision making process opens our heart in faith. We've done what we can with what we have – trusting God with the outcome.

Let us pray: *Lord, we lift our basket of indecisions and worries to you. Bless our fragmented thoughts. Give us faith to trust and hope, knowing you always have our best interests at heart. Through the one who makes all things possible, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen*

Friday, May 29, 2015

Text: Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23



We could easily read the Parable of the Sower as a description of various groups of people. As if there are certain people who are, well... just plain rocky soil. Some people have no depth. Then there are others who hang out with the thorns. Some happen to be good soil.

If types of soil are types of people then by making this distinction we've set ourselves up as a judge of others. But the truth of the matter is all these soils reside within each and every one of us. And depending on the day, or the moment, or the circumstance, we end up presenting one or the other.

The thorns, the rocky ground, the hard beaten path – these are obstacles (not people) to God's kingdom breaking into our lives; barriers that prohibit the life of God's word to take root in our lives on any given day.

For me today, it's striving too much. Striving to get "this" done, so I can get "that" done and when "that's" done, I can go on to the next project. What's *that* all about? Do I think the more I get done, the more brownie points I'll have to win God's favor?" It appears I'm "working" on tilling the soil so it will be fertile. So it will be good enough.

Jesus does not use this parable to exhort hearers to "be good soil". He tells us this so we are aware of the many obstacles to God's word being active in our lives, barriers that we construct that hinder God's creative word to take root and grow.

The good news in this parable is – Jesus, the active seed of God's word, gives of himself generously, continuously, regardless of our rocks, thorns, and hardness. The Sower keeps sowing extravagantly even in the least promising places. Jesus does not give up on us, but keeps working on whatever is hardened, rocky, or thorny in and among us.

Let us pray: *I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen* - Ephesians 3:16-20



Saturday, May 30, 2015

Text: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-15

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:"

Managing time is always a challenge. If managing our time means trying to control it we can become anxious. "Anxious to go and anxious to do" takes us out of the present moment, a place where God's little gifts often reside.

When my kids were between the ages of five and fifteen time was of the essence. I was working full time and finishing my bachelor's degree. I was constantly on the go and if I didn't get from point A to point B soon enough, anxiety set in.

One morning as I was stuffing backpacks, clearing the breakfast table, and hustling kids out the door, my panic to get to work on time was in full force. I was frantically helping my youngest gather up her remaining school items when upon opening the back door we saw the bus drive by. She had missed the bus... again. Driving her to school meant I would be late for work... again. I could not hide my disappointment and frustration. As my little five year old stood in the kitchen listening to me carry on she looked at me with her big brown eyes and said in a calm voice, "Momma, it's no bigga deal."

She was right. In light of hurricane disasters, the global economy, nations at war, and teen suicides, missing the bus was "no bigga deal." I had made it a big deal. I learned a big lesson that day. The more I tried to control time, the more it controlled me. I also realized in the stillness of my daughter's words that a God moment occurred. It was time to put things into their proper perspective.

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; (3:1, 7b)" That day, my daughter spoke and I was silent. Thank God for that moment.

Let us pray: God of the universe, you are the alpha and omega, the beginning and end. Remind us of your infinity. Our sense of time is not like yours. Our sense of time is limiting whereas God moments are limitless. By your Spirit, grant us peace in all things... today and tomorrow. Amen

