

First Congregational Church of Winchester, UCC
11th Sunday after Pentecost
August 20, 2017

Rev. Dr. Jessica McArdle

Title: "Whose Side Are You On?"

Text: Psalm 133 and Genesis 45:1-15

During the Civil War, the congregants who gathered each Sunday in the historic St. John's Episcopal church directly across the White House in Washington D.C. would all sit together in the sanctuary. But depending if your sympathies were with the south or if you were a northerner – dictated on what side of the church you would sit. There wasn't an actual boundary line that ran down the center of the worship space. But then again, there was no need for a visible line. Everyone...everyone understood whose side they were on.

This morning's scripture focuses our attention on what holds us together and what happens when bonds are torn apart. But like those that gathered in that historic church during the Civil War – the scripture speaks volumes not only about the distant past but resonates in the here and now. Our present. Our reality. What we are struggling with. What we are facing.

Psalm 133 opens up with these words, "How very good and pleasant when kindred live together in unity." I confess when I saw that this psalm was designated as one of today's lectionary readings, it was the last piece of scripture I wanted to use.

Writer and preacher, Stan Mast, tells about a man with whom he recently played golf. A long-time Christian conservative, the man was apoplectic about the way his grandson has been "polluted" by the liberal faculty of a college. The faculty had committed the unthinkable - they had turned his grandson into a Democrat. "How can a Democrat call themselves a Christian?" the man exclaimed. His rant made Stan Mast think of a dear friend he has that cannot fathom how Christians can be blasé about issues like immigration. "Don't those blankey, blank Republicans know that the Bible is full of calls to justice?" she screams.

"How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity?" Fat chance.'

The events of these past months, last week's violence in Charlottesville and the large-scale protest in Boston yesterday are still fresh on our minds. So if our speech and actions are to be deemed relevant and true, the words from the twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth, come to mind when he said, "We must hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."

So, "Holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other," we encounter the other passage from today's lectionary readings, which is taken from Book of Genesis.

It is the story of Joseph. Not the Joseph we hear about during the Christmas season – but much farther back, approximately in the period of 2000 to 1600 BCE.

This is the boy Joseph standing with his father, Jacob, who just presented him with a most beautiful robe. Unlike the plain and roughened clothing that Joseph's many other siblings wore, his own coat was bedazzling.

Now Jacob had twelve sons. Most of his sons struggled to win Jacob's affection but Joseph was his favorite. Joseph was not only handsome and intelligent but he had this uncanny gift of interpreting visionary dreams, including the ones he had. One dream that Joseph shared with his other brothers, foretold that ultimately he would rule over them...hardly an effective way to win his brothers over.

So though on appearances Jacob's large family seemed unified, there was distrust. In earlier years, Jacob had betrayed those closest to him and had been personally betrayed as well. And amongst Jacob's sons there had been acts of violence. Retaliation for slights – real or perceived was the order of business.

It was a family of "whose side are you on" rather than one that cultivated genuine trust and freedom. Joseph's family exhibited what conservative writer and commentator, David Brooks, calls tribalism. Brooks explains that tribalism is a way of coping with anxiety. As fear mongering and blaming are the principle means of dispelling anxiety with tribalism, leadership skills that require objectivity and facing hard truths are almost non-existent. Likewise, the capacity for remorse and/or admitting wrongdoing are deemed as signs of weakness - rather than recognized for the strengths that they are.

Though highly seductive when families and whole societies are feeling anxious and want simple answers to vexing problems, tribalism is dangerous. For an "us verses them" mentality is incapable of seeing another's humanity. Other people are just a means to an end.

Wanting a quick fix, Joseph's brothers decided to rid themselves of him. So while out in the fields and away from their father Jacob, they stripped

their brother, Joseph, of his robe and sold him to some traveling merchants. Realizing that they needed to explain their brother's sudden disappearance to their father, they took his coat of many colors and dipped it in animal's blood. Bringing the coat to their father, Jacob was overcome with grief: a wild animal must have killed his beloved son, Joseph.

Yet for Joseph, all was not lost. Though sent to Egypt as a slave, Joseph's skill in interpreting dreams ultimately came to the attention of those in Pharaoh's court.

Pharaoh had two dreams that troubled him deeply. Other officials and interpreters within his court were mystified. What could the dreams possibly mean? But when the dreams were told to Joseph, he realized that a cataclysmic seven drought would occur after a number of years of unparalleled abundance.

Explaining to Pharaoh the meaning of his two dreams, Joseph didn't just stop there. Recognizing the magnitude of this anticipated ecological disaster upon the entirety of the then known world, and the turmoil such a drought would cause – Joseph did not resort to fear mongering but calmly and competently laid out a plan of action. But more so, he recognized that Egypt's stability through this crisis meant making available the stores of grain to other countries in the then known world.

Joseph saved not only Egypt but the surrounding world (at that time) from certain starvation and perhaps annihilation. However, Joseph was also an immigrant. In fact the Egyptians did not associate with Hebrews, particularly those from the nomadic or shepherd stock. Isn't an irony that this story pivots on the insight and leadership of a known foreigner.

What if we didn't ask ourselves, "Whose side we are on," but instead pondered, "Whose we are?" To whom do we ultimately belong to when the span of our life is drawing on its final hour. Whose am I?

Indeed, Joseph foresaw that the drought was of a magnitude unimaginable in his time. It would last seven years. Yet prior to the devastating drought when there were seven years of plenty – Joseph directed a portion of the harvested grain to be stored. In time, the drought would bring his brothers to Egypt in search of food. In time, the betrayal that his brothers had committed against him and the duplicity shown to their father in the wake of their brother's disappearance would unfold. Try as we may, the truth has a way of surfacing, as hard as we may try to bury it.

The story of Joseph demonstrates that a culture that strives for forgiveness, that does not return evil for evil, that refuses to escalate already difficult situations – has the capacity to foster hope and build the trust so essential for leadership during time of crisis. His words to his brothers and his own family that had betrayed him,

“You intended it for evil but God intended it for good,” means that following God-in-Christ may well put us in situations that require us to actively resist injustice.

Yet in contrast to asking, “Whose side am I on?” God touches our spirit and confirms whose we are. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God confirms our identity in Christ.

Being sane people of faith who do what they can to steer clear of the lure of fear-mongering and blame, can be a pretty tall order in anxious times but God does not ask us to carry on alone.

Psalms 133 also speaks of the power of the Holy Spirit. It compares it to precious oil and the refreshing dew upon a tall mountain. It is compared to the unity, the sweet unity when God’s people co-exist in mutual trust.

Back in January, Barry and I showed up in Will’s office late one afternoon. That night, we planned to board a train and make our way to the Women’s March that was to be held in Washington DC beginning the next morning. Not quite knowing what to expect, I asked Will if he would offer a prayer for us prior to our departure.

Will did pray as well as share scripture with us. But in recognizing that it is the Holy Spirit that would be our advocate, comforter and guide – he called forth an ancient but important tradition in the life of faith which harkens to Psalm 133. He anointed us, asking that the Spirit of the Living God go before, beside and behind us. Throughout that evening and into the next day, and beyond, I continued to meditate on whom Barry and I ultimately belong...to whom all of us here ultimately belong. It is no longer whose side we are on. For each of us belong to God made known to us in Christ. Indeed, God touches our spirit and confirms whose we are. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God confirms our identity in Christ.

It has been said that during his presidency and as the Civil War raged, Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, was a frequent visitor to St. John’s Episcopal Church in Washington DC. A humble man, Lincoln chose a pew in the back of the sanctuary. I’ve wondered what was on his heart and mind, as Lincoln sat alone in that pew and witnessed firsthand the divisions within that congregation. But being a man of faith, I do know that Lincoln called upon the Spirit of the Living God. He knew whose he was, to whom he belonged in life and in death.

Indeed, God touches our spirit and confirms whose we are.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.