

LAMENTATIONS 1:1-6 and/or 3:19-26 or HABAKKUK 1:1-4; 2:1-4

PSALM 137 or PSALM 37:1-9

II TIMOTHY 1:1-14

LUKE 17:5-10

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 2, 2022; Year C

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

How Wide Is It?

Today should be one of the great feast days on the liturgical calendar, this unofficial festival of the Church Year we call World Communion. It is a day when we not only recognize our similarities while downplaying or minimizing, avoiding or ignoring, our numerous and layered differences, significant as they are, but even so we find a way to celebrate our commonality, a celebration assuming that, in the hopes and prayers of Jesus, we would all be one, collectively unified in soul and spirit as the body of Christ. After all, it is the oneness in Christ Jesus that is one of the phrases that drives our denominational initiatives, our passionate aspirations, as the United Church of Christ, “that they may all be one,” despite the fact that our liberal leanings frequently put us on a denominational, ecclesial, island. We stand with other theological progressives in what seems to have unfortunately become a theological dinosaur, a steadfast minority of Christians, a remnant of the tried and true faith, believing and serving amidst a cacophony of voices of those within Christendom who have embraced a Christianity that would have been quite foreign, diametrically opposed, to Jesus and his way, contrary to his preaching and teaching, his mission and ministry, the polarities between us nowhere even close. The sad fact of the matter is that we are not one and have not been unified for a very long time. We are not close, much less even close to becoming one, and the chasm is getting worse, wider by the day, literally by the hour! In the immortal opening words of the writer of Lamentations that surely say it best or worse, “Oh, no!” While we may have our issues with honest and sincere biblical and theological conservatives, and even fundamentalists, what we are witnessing up close and personal in the sectarian movement called and now celebrated as “Christian Nationalism,” a wacko phenomenon led mostly by white evangelical mega-church types and partisan political conspiratorial hacks, has perhaps become the ultimate heresy, the greatest threat to the faith of our forebears, our faithful fathers and mothers who birthed and nurtured the early Church through its most frail and fragile, though exciting embryonic days of discovery.

Yes, faithful flock, we are now living in a whole new world described as Christianity but often devoid of loving grace and merciful peace, endearing Christian characteristics that have long defined our faith, all these pillars, these foundational cornerstones, reflecting the welcoming and hospitably inclusive invitation that forms the very essence of Jesus' meaning, movement, and method, giving momentum to his holy way in determining every interaction forming and framing the best of human relationships. Frankly, this bizarre expression, this weirdly strange manifestation, constitutes a new and different religion altogether, at best a "Christianesque" mutation of a most perverse adaptation. The chasm is wide, a great gulf fixed, with many joyfully and zealously getting sucked into the intoxicating vortex of a most convenient least common cultural denominator, a path of least resistance defending at all costs familial tribe and clan, always suspicious of the other. You cannot get there from here! How wide is it? The world is wide, but the gap between the radical extremes, good and bad, the distance between the polarities within Christendom, seems so much wider as we exponentially grow further and further apart from one another. **We are way beyond the hope of building bridges and finding consensus!** I think I am beginning to get the meaning of Jesus' mysterious line that many are called but few are chosen. As hard as it is for us to acknowledge and accept, it is high time, past time, we clearly name that our version of Christianity, what we believe to be a direct legacy bequeathed to us Jesus freaks by the rabbi himself, yes, an heirloom directly traced to the person of the historical Jesus of Nazareth and his gospel imperatives. Yes, what is new is old with us, the same and yet different, yes, unfortunately and yes, ironically, becoming alternative rather than mainstream. Somehow, we are now the outliers! We have become the exception to the rule, abnormal, becoming sectarian in our own right, presenting a counter-narrative that is indeed, yes, counter cultural when juxtaposed to the prevailing cultural trends that are now demonically blowing like a hurricane force wind, spreading like a California wildfire. Now more than ever, our witness, our testimony, must be shouted from the rooftop, proclaimed with clarity and conviction, our flag proudly flapping in the ecclesial breeze. **Succinctly stated, the baseline of our faith is that God is love, the essence thereof, and that means that God loves, yes, unconditionally, just as we are created in the divine image, with no regard or respect to anyone while regarding and respecting everyone, no qualifications, equivocations, ifs, ands, or buts. If it is not loving, it is not of God! Anything else, anything less, is unacceptable! God is love! That is our unapologetic expectation! On that premise and promise we will not bend or budge! It comes down to this simple equation because it really is that simple! It must be our line in the sand, a plumb line indeed! We can no longer quietly practice our faithful piety but must proclaim from the mountaintop the message of Jesus and his love. This is no time to be bashful or timid about our convictions!**

The writer of Lamentations, one of the most beautiful books of prose in all the Bible, words of life and living from what is called the “Wisdom Literature” of the Hebrew Bible, even more specifically one of the five books called the Ketuvim (Writings). Lamentations is one of the Five Megillot (Five Scrolls) including the likes of Song of Songs, the Book of Ruth, Ecclesiastes, and the Book of Esther. These laments describe in excruciating detail what was the current state of affairs associated with the historic Babylonian captivity of Israel, recorded as if once frozen in real time. Listen to the haunting sounds of the soliloquist, presumably but most assuredly not the prophet Jeremiah, as he waxes eloquent the misery confronting him and his newly exiled people, “Oh, no! She sits alone, the city that was once full of people! Once great among the nations, she has become like a widow!” Please do remember that widows and orphans had no power among the people and were helplessly dependent on the good graces of those who held the gold! “Once a queen over provinces, she has become a slave! She weeps bitterly in the night, her tears on her cheek! None of her lovers comfort her! All her friends lied to her! They have become her enemies!” And on and on and on goes the melancholy gloom and despair! This unnamed prophet is describing the new reality born of an unfortunate circumstance. As with every narrative from the Bible, every text has a context and today’s contextual curiosity is that the Israelites have just been taken captive once again, this time by their Babylonian adversary, King Nebuchadnezzar doing his best Vladimir Putin impersonation, this Russian czar a reincarnation of every evil despot and wicked thug to ever disgrace the planet with his perversely poisonous presence. Jerusalem, the holy city of Zion, had been destroyed, leveled to the ground, including Solomon’s opulent temple complex. Flash backs to days in Egyptian bondage, indentured at the hands of the Pharaoh ruling on his evil throne, Ramses II, himself another epitome of Vladimir Putin, the children of Israel once again were living the lives of slaves, subject to disrespectful masters, the Israelites’ sacrosanct national and religious purity tarnished with a forced infusion of cultural pollution flavored with the piety of proudly pagan polytheism, making all the people of the promise unclean in every way. What a crisis! What a conundrum! What a conflict! And so, the “lamentator”, made up word, not to be confused with the “Sermonator,” speaks a word summing up all the ills and the negative projections and transferences that could ever be uttered by a now hopelessly banished people. This displaced people would have been a psychotherapist’s dream!

And now as we read these ancient words from our postmodern perspective, influenced by our twenty-first century world, measured through our heavily biased lenses, with all its contemporary complexities, perhaps flavored by our progressive proclivities, do these starkly graphic words have a word to say to us, a relevant message delivered to our open and closed ears. Is there any relevance? Can we relate to our ancient forebears in the faith as we read their painful story, striving to put ourselves into the dynamics of their poignant

plotlines, vainly attempting to empathize, to sympathize, with their painful plight? Can we find ways to see ourselves in their story? Can their story be our story? Is their story in any way our story? Imagining for a moment the reality of a theistic deity, a God beyond the sky sitting on a great white throne in the heavenly places, looking down on creation and our human condition, what might the Holy be thinking as the Divine assesses the human creation, a humanity that seems to have run amuck, then as now and always? But even more so, what does God think of the way human beings have hijacked the good inherently found in most if not all the major religious expressions even when those faith traditions exploit beliefs and their sacred narratives to curry favor, to gain advantage, to control or manipulate the masses, to perversely persuade the populace? And closer to home, when God looks upon the Christian Church, 2000 plus years of institutional Christianity, in all its myriad concretized expressions, good and bad, what perceptions are formed, what emotions are wrought, what thoughts and feelings come to the divine mind? My hunch is a whole lot of sadness and disappointment, distress and despair, even a sense of hopelessness born from the fact that many who claim Christ and purport to follow Jesus today, are failing to authentically, genuinely, embrace Jesus, devoid of even a modicum of ecclesiological and theological integrity, and are failing to do so miserably, seemingly intentionally so! Sometimes we need the smelling salts that imagines our God as up close and personal, intimately present, interactive rather than detached and distant, a God who really is affected by our thoughts and actions, who perhaps does wistfully respond to our being and doing, feeling the pain that comes with watching the antics of the very images of the Divine in action. Yes, it is a necessary game of let's pretend! Now while these images reflect the fantasies of tradition and our childhood illusions, sometimes it might indeed be helpful to play a game of let's pretend and bring the concept of a mysterious God, a God of transcendent mystery, invoking our eternal sense of awe and wonder, closer to home as if right next door, personified or anthropomorphized if but for a fleeting moment if to only somehow get our attention. Maybe we need to creatively visualize our concepts of God in imaginatively tangible up close and personal ways that cause us to question our motives and all the negative reactivity we manifest in the world, all the negative residual that unfortunately accompanies our humanity. Think of the 1987 song "From a Distance" made famous by Bette Midler and Nancy Griffith, a God who is intently watching our every move! Yes, that haunting line, "God is watching us!" Evidently, this was the perception, these were the very intensely real machinations that drove the ancient writer to proclaim and record these dissonantly despondent ideas, a composition that speaks to the dreadful curse that seemed to afflict both the human and the Divine. The opening words of Lamentations say it all, "Oh, no!"

In today's Gospel lection from Luke, Jesus purportedly responds to a cry of demand from his disciples to "increase our faith!" Jesus, as he so often does with seemingly inane or

irrelevant lines of questioning or irrational reasoning, seems to dismiss their query as if he never heard it, though it is obvious that he heard them loud and clear. Jesus' response frankly is a disappointing and unsettling one because it reveals that none of us has even an inkling, not an iota, of faith, no capacity for faith, no matter how religious or spiritual we believe ourselves to be. Jesus levels the playing field and the bar is revealed to be depressingly, disturbingly, even disgustingly, low, a baseline that even the most unfaithful, an agnostic or atheist, could achieve with far more than relative ease! We are all rendered moot, hopelessly inept when it comes to our faithfulness, despite any and all our impassioned commitment to church attendance, Bible study, social action, mission and ministry, belief or faith, or whatever spirituality we are able to muster. Whether our efforts be of an individual nature or a collective effort as a communal enterprise, including all our best, most noble, aspirations as a local missional church, as a people seeking to build beloved faith community, yes, we come up lacking. Truly we find ourselves far short of whatever goal Jesus had in mind for the human creature and graphically expressed with what is a surprising, no shocking, image that soberly captures our imagination. Jesus is reported to have replied to the disciples' inquiry, let's call it their demand, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you!" Really! Seriously! And the farmer hauled another load away! Come on people, we all know this is not possible, a fabulously fantastic feat far beyond our best, our most heroic, efforts or inclinations. It cannot be done! All this conjecture does is leave us hopelessly despondent, wallowing in the self-pity of knowing the impossibility laden within what might be described as cruel or toxic words. This clarification does nothing other than to turn us away in sadness much like the rich young man who could not relinquish his oppressive possessions despite this would-be-novice's heartfelt desire to follow Jesus as his lord, despite receiving a personal invitation but with the caveat of an ultimatum from the rabbi. This caustic line is not only the equivalent but surpasses the most derogatory admonishment typically made by Jesus against those, reserved for those, who were not seeking to follow him and his way. After all, we are the good guys! We have signed on the dotted line! Do we not get an "A" for effort? What is our motivation, knowing that failure is already assured? We have drunk the proverbial Jesus Kool Aid! We believe! We have no other alternative, no other place to go because we are sold and have sold out! As a disciple once affirmed and lamented, where else would we go because we have come to believe that Jesus has the words of eternal life. Yes, they may be his private possession, but he has graciously chosen to share them! If we cannot succeed, yes, we of all people, if we are subject to abject failure for the cause, then what in the name of belief and faith will become of any of us? Jesus knew all too well to not give the narcissistically self-absorbed, self-centered, disciples what they were asking, even demanding, to not give in and give them what they wanted, to grant the wishes of their hearts' desire! After all, whatever

constitutes our faith, it is already enough, it is always enough! It always has been because it is of God!

And somewhere in all my homiletical musings this morning the answer is surely to be found. Perhaps the point that Jesus was trying to make was not a point pointing out our flaws and failures, but the vanity implied in our seeking to have a faith that would become a badge of honor, an idol, something eliciting pride and arrogance, no longer a gift of grace but an expectation, a requirement, a quid pro quo, if we dare to agree to this mode of life and living, this disciplined lifestyle. In other words, the disciples' request or demand, while appearing on the surface as a worthy aspiration, was fraught with every temptation and vice that afflicts those who supposedly are seeking a noble and virtuous obedience, a contemplative, reflective, piety. The disciples' desire may very well have been another version of James and John's attempt to sway Jesus regarding who among the twelve would sit at his right and his left in the realm of God, disregarding and offending their fellow ten who surely thought it but did not have the temerity, the audacity, to say it! The truth of the matter is that we all walk by faith and not by sight, knowing, despite the fantastic but hollow promises of those who claim to be in the know, we are promised nothing more than even the persons who have no faith at all or who believe in whatever alternative path floats their boat. The phrase from Job says it all about a lot, "The rain falls on the just and the unjust!" We do not, or at least should not, choose to follow Jesus as a card-carrying disciple, expecting better treatment or being granted special status, including those magical, mystical, miraculous, gifts of the Spirit, whatever they may be. Whatever we get we get, and it is all cause for celebration and thanksgiving! None of us are special except that we are all special! I can only imagine what the disciples' motivation was when they approached Jesus with a request that appeared to be innocuous on the surface, a harmless request bathed in humility, but was deeply immersed in narcissism and arrogance. Was it an ultimatum? Did they want to perform the kinds of things their rabbi was able to do? Did they want a piece of the pie, perhaps even surpassing the abilities of their master, their teacher? Evidently, Jesus saw right through them and their agenda in their innocently feigned ruse and brought them back to earth with a big, loud, thud, a crash that can still be heard around the world!

My hunch is that the bottom line for these sobering lines was the stark reminder that when we choose to follow Jesus, it is never about what we might get, supposed blessings God will graciously grant to us, what we may attain by a life of obedience and service, yes, our faithfulness, what we will receive in the divine-human, the human-divine, transaction. No, it is never about our reward, earthly or heavenly, but rather is always about what we might give, knowing we are giving in return, all that we might offer our fellow brothers and sisters in Jesus' precious name, any contributions we might make to

the wider world, this global village, in which we all live and share, and to use my favorite biblical line, “live and move and have our being,” and I would add doing! An increase in faith is irrelevant to our internal inclinations to do good, and/or our unique ability to offer cups of cold water, to feed, to quench, to clothe, to visit, to do whatever is manifest in our corner of the world as an immediate need. There are many today, conspiratorial nutjobs all, in and outside the Church, many in authority who have political cache, especially here in these United States have bought into the most absurd conspiracy theories. These reality denying conspiracists have ingested some indigestibly bad, rotten and rank to the core, porridge, and are perversely recreating the gospel, making it up as they go, in their proudly demonic image, a dysfunctional belief system far removed from the humble way of the always lovingly embracing, graciously endearing, man of utmost integrity from Nazareth. They have bought into a system on steroids that separates and segregates, that divides and conquers. Amazingly, they have even managed to surpass the exclusivist power-mongering lusts that quickly consumed the patriarchy of the early Church and found its way even into what became our Christian biblical story. Their black and white world is a world obsessed with sin, salvation, manipulation, and control, including a church-state, a state-church, devoid of so many boundaries that it is impossible to see where one begins and the other ends. They call it belief, they call it faith, but it is anything but either! It is a transaction! Frankly, there is no Jesus in any of it! Period! It is the ultimate heresy, an apostate position that has nowhere good to go! And those who espouse this nonsense are nothing more than reprobate “religiosos”, made up word, who pervert the freedom-advocating tenets of Christ’s gospel while throwing the man named Jesus under the proverbial bus, obliterating his message, his preaching and teaching, his mission and ministry, all in the name of procuring power and prestige, consolidating constituents, yes, dividing, while seeking to conquer, a country and its best asset, its freedom, and liberty-for-all loving citizens.

In Paul’s epistle to Timothy, the apostle reminds his young protégé of something that should always accompany our faith-filled, faithless, journey. He instructs his ready, willing, and able pupil to never be ashamed of the testimony he has been given, but to share this good news, trusting in God to do the rest, that grace will abound and carry the day, making up any difference that seeks to get in the way of our witness. At the end of the day, belief and faith are always and only a matter of trust and Paul says clearly that he knows in as much as he needs to know in whom he places his trust. Paul then affirms, “I’m convinced that God is powerful enough to protect what God has placed in my trust until that day. Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching that you heard from me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Protect this good thing that has been placed in your trust through the Holy Spirit who lives in us.” I do not think that even Jesus could have said it any better!

So, as we receive these eucharistic elements of bread and wine as we find our own unique ways to not only observe, but to celebrate this World-Wide Communion Sunday, yes, we pray that we will all be one, praying that ours in not a hollow prayer, knowing the odds. But perhaps even more so on this unofficial feast day, an unofficial festival like none other on the official liturgical calendar, we must name what is as we clearly see it, call this apostasy, this heresy, for exactly what it is, proclaiming beyond a shadow of all doubt what we know in our hearts and minds to be true and of Jesus, and therefore, of God, that all this churchly stuff is born of love and for all time remains baptized in love! Perhaps if we dare to be as so bold, to be this audaciously and outrageously courageous to name the good, the bad, and the ugly, then maybe, just maybe, the ultimate irony will happen in our lives and will be ours for the taking and our faith will indeed be increased! Wouldn't that just be a stich? Wouldn't that be just like our serendipitous God to do something like that? Who knows?

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and indeed increases our faith each and every day, reminding us that we really do not need to ask for what is already given! Amen and amen.