

**The Reverend Julia Dunbar
St. John's Episcopal Church/Jamaica Plain Boston
Pentecost 15
Jeremiah 18:1-11
Psalm 139
Philemon
Luke 14:25-33**

**May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart
be acceptable in your sight, O Christ my Savior and Redeemer.
Amen**

Good Morning,

**I just finished re-reading a little book by Barbara Brown
Taylor called, "When God is Silent." In it she says, "Silence
has become God's final defense against our idolatry. By
limiting our speech, God gets some relief from our descriptive
assaults. By hiding inside a veil of glory, God eludes our
projections. God deflects our attempts at control by
withdrawing into silence, knowing that nothing gets to us like
the failure of our speech. When we run out of words, then and
perhaps only then can God be God."?**

On this Labor Day weekend, I bristle as I picture all the words I have spoken and heard since last Labor Day weekend – virtually buried under a tower of Babylon – A Farside cartoon showing a mountain of run on sentences, phrases out of context running into an alphabet soup of letters – thousands & thousands of jumbo bags of scrabble letters on steroids. I wonder who else is buried in here with me. I yearn for silence. But what’s a preacher to do?

There is so much that can be said about today’s offerings from scripture. However, my choice today is to listen most closely to what the heartfelt messages may be – spoken or unspoken – endeavoring to do so with respect for the economy of language.

Theologian Marcus Borg reminds us that the Bible is not God’s story of God. The Hebrew bible is ancient Israel’s story of God; the New Testament is the early Christian movement’s story of God, especially as revealed in Jesus.

Jeremiah constructs the metaphor of God as the potter molding clay for good or ill. This metaphor began in the early mythology of Mesopotamia – dragons and other creatures were molded from earth’s clay. One of the two creation stories in Genesis has Adam being molded from clay. Tools or weapons can be made from the same slab of clay. Quite wonderfully, clay can be worked and reworked – made into a thing of beauty, a vessel of love & kindness.

The Psalmist we hear from today has a construct of a very personal God. Many people hold that construct as central to their faith. “O Lord you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.” More often than not, when I sit with a patient in the hospital, this is God they count on. This is the God to whom they lift up their hopes & prayers for a cure. This is the God to whom they give credit for every good thing

in their lives. This is the God from whom the miracle of a cure or at least a few more good months or years is requested or sometimes expected. And if the cure doesn't come, this is God of confusion – the God of Silence, the one they may feel angry, or betrayed or heartbroken by.

Sometimes, working with a patient over time, they may remold their vision of a miracle – from a cure to a healing. They may experience a healing of the wounds within them – and recognize as miracles those who love and care for them with kindness & compassion. Perhaps the quintessential miracle in life is to love & be loved.

In today's epistle, Paul appeals to Philemon, Bishop of Gaza and to his wife, the apostle Apphia to take back into their fold a man who had been a slave. At the time Paul wrote this letter, he was a very old man. On-ees-e-mus had been with Paul through the most difficult & debilitating days of Paul's life.

This epistle is unique – instead of Paul using his authority to convince or command the people he humbly he says, I appeal to you in love. Take this man who was living as a slave and treasure him as your beloved brother.

That appeal is not static – it does not simply sit on the pages of ancient texts. It is the appeal of God to world and of the world to God. I appeal to you in love to see the face of beloved when you see others and when you see yourself, a child of God – loved beyond all reason & measure.

Luke's gospel is an elaborated version of Matthew's gospel, which was written much earlier. It seems to me that significant educational and class differences between Matthew, the Jewish scribe and Luke, the Hellenistic educated physician are in evidence here. While they differ stylistically, at the heart of it, both gospels deliver the same message.

The spirit of God is the essential source of all love. Only by tapping into the Source, can we sustain and deepen the love the Christ in one another and in ourselves. We can easily, understandably become fixated on things, on individuals, even on family conflict. If we can still ourselves and be with God's silence, we may every now and then receive a whisper of grace. In any case, we will eventually hear the message of kindness our own hearts are trying to deliver.

In closing, I would like to share with you a powerfully written poem by Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab Nye.

Kindness

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and
purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you every where
like a shadow or a friend.

Amen