

Weekly Reading – Monday, June 28, 2010

Okay, we're looking at the lessons for Sunday, July 4, 2010. In addition to being, for Americans, "Independence Day," it is also the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time and Proper 9. As noted over at "What's Tony Thinking?" I would encourage worship planners who are including patriotic hymns to select "America the Beautiful" in preference to the popular and now widely used, "God Bless America." The former has some element of contrition and recognition of the sovereignty of God, while the latter is pretty empty really.

Isaiah 66: 10 - 14

From the final chapter of Isaiah or, as scholars would have it, the book of "Third Isaiah" with its words of comfort to the returned exiles. This text anticipates the eventual restoration of Jerusalem, but goes much deeper when the images shift from urban prosperity to maternal care. "You shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." This is quite a remarkable move and shift. It speaks to our deepest need, which is not really for power or prosperity or ascendancy among the nations, but deep love and knowing, to be precious in God's sight. Sometimes we think that what we really need are things or achievements or success or power. But is that our deepest need? And is that what God longs to give us? Or is it something else? What we long for is the knowledge that we are loved and that the Holy One rejoices in us as a mother rejoices in her child. For those so inclined, there's probably something to be said from this about what we really need as a nation. We want power. We need assurance. We want wealth, we need love.

Galatians 6: (1 - 6) 7 - 16

This is the final reading in the series from Galatians that concludes now, after five weeks. As is characteristic of Paul's letters, the latter parts often turn from the core theological teaching that dominate in the earlier portions of his epistles to moral exhortation and addressing particular people and issues in the church. In the first six verses there is a wonderful tension. On one hand, Paul encourages that we "bear one another's burdens." But a few verses later, he encourages each one to "test their own work," and "carry their own loads." Which is it, are we to "bear one another's burdens" or "carry our own loads?" Both, I think. It is not an either/ or but a both/ and. In the final section Paul does return to his overall theological concern and theme in this letter, the distortion of the gospel by the reintroduction of religion as human rules to be fulfilled in order to win God's favor not grace to be received and trusted. Again, another famous verse, "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!" There's a powerful sermon by Paul Tillich, titled "The New Creation," on this verse.

Luke 10: 1 - 11, 16 - 20

Here the seventy disciples (a larger group than the 12 in Luke's gospel) become apostles. That is they are "sent out," which is the meaning of "apostle." Though they do not cease to be disciples, students, learners and followers, they are also sent out to teach, preach and heal, that is do the ministry that Jesus himself engages in doing. Sometimes we learn best by teaching, we progress furthest by doing and trying. Sometimes you have to leave the classroom or preparation room and try our wings. Churches by and large don't do all that well at this phase of things. How many churches send people out to minister/ serve in Christ's name and by the Holy Spirit's power? There's something to be said for a couple features of this sending: they are sent out in pairs, meaning they have someone to count on and to answer to. And they are welcomed back where they give an account of their ministry and receive Christ's blessing. One of our Festival of Preaching NW preachers, Ayanna Johnson did a wonderful sermon on the closing verses of this text, where Jesus says, "Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." In other words, don't get all caught up in your achievements or the accolades of others. Take your real and deepest joy in this assurance and promise, that you are known and beloved of God, that your name is "written in heaven." This ties in with the Isaiah text and my comments on that. Sometimes we just need to hear that, whatever happens, if we cast out demons or just move on down the road without apparent triumphs, our names are written in heaven.