

**Sunday, August 20, 2017**

**Lectionary 20**

**11th Sunday after Pentecost**

*Delivered to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church*

*1301 N. Broom St Wilmington DE 19806*

*Rev. Jason Churchill*

It's been a rough week or so.

With Charlottesville and the aftermath I'm wondering...how's everyone feeling today?

There's a bittersweet feeling that I have in regards to everything. Last Sunday Craig and I spent a delightful afternoon with Dottie - talking about her sixty plus years of memories at St. Stephen's, looking forward to the celebration of her 99th birthday.

No sooner did we arrive home did I find a text on my phone from a colleague in North Wilmington..."are you going to Rockford Park tonight?"

"Rockford Park" I thought..."I'm too exhausted." You know, liturgical naps are a thing and I was looking forward to one...but I was curious..."there for what!?"

Well, turns out that in a span of 24 hours, Wilmington committed itself to rally for Charlottesville to support peaceful resistance to hate...and to remember the senseless murder of a young woman at the hands of an out of control, hate worshipping individual.

One person noted..."we need Trolley Square's church to be present."

What a blessing...to be part of a church that is a blessing to the community. You may not realize, but what we do matters.

It's bittersweet though. Wilmington is awesome...in less than a day over 300 people came, witnessed, and loved the way God calls us to.

No sign of this alt right challenging our position. No arrests. Nothing broken - except the hearts of good people crying out to the God "Lord help me."

Even our bishop was present.

If ever, I thought, there was time when we knew what it felt like to have God's face made to shine upon us...it was then.

To borrow from another psalm...even in the sadness, in valley of the shadow of death known as racism and hate, God made God's face to shine upon us.

God, our God has truly blessed us.

On Wednesday, again unexpectedly, I was invited to bring greetings from St. Stephen's and this time, the Synod.

On Walnut, Bethel AME had a prayer service.

There, being only one of three white clergy amongst a host of clergy of color, God showed me that even in the face of hardship and hate - our siblings of color still could praise God...and in this interfaith gathering "all the peoples praised God."

Again, through this powerful interfaith witness - St. Stephen's was blessed.

Blessed to be a blessing.

How often have you heard that?

Today we are going to bless backpacks for children at Hilltop...

But blessing...what is it (other than a final signal that our worship is almost over)?

Well...the internet dictionary tells us:

It is "God's favor and protection."

"A prayer asking for God's favor and protection."

"Grace said over a meal."

"Approval that allows or helps you to do something."

Perhaps the psalm today reminds you of one of the most famous blessings:

May the LORD bless you and guard you –

בְּרַכְךָ יְהוָה, וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ

(Yevhārēkh-khā Adhōnāy veyishmerēkhā ...)

May the LORD make His face shed light upon you and be gracious unto you –

יָאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וַיַּחֲנֶךָ

("Yā'ēr Adhōnāy pānāw ēlekhā viḥunnēkkā ...)

May the LORD lift up His face unto you and give you peace –

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וַיִּשַׁם לְךָ שְׁלוֹמִים

("Yissā Adhōnāy pānāw ēlekhā viyāsēm lekhā shālōm.")

This is the Aaronic Blessing.

A treasured benediction passed on by the ages.

The psalm takes the ancient blessing and wraps it up into the psalmists' experience of the harvest...a bountiful harvest. It talks about the God of all goodness that flows into the people and into their mission...into the earth with a divine and holy blessing for all peoples...ALL peoples.

I wonder if it is possible to take these ancient words and continue to wrap them around our contemporary experiences throughout our lives here in the city and in the world?

What do these words of blessing mean to you?

Can we take these words and wrap them around our experiences such as returning to school, caring for our four-legged furry family members, could we bless bicycles...cars...each other?

Can we use this ancient blessing to pull us deeper into our relationship with God and ultimately with one another?

Today we are going to bless these backpacks for children that we may never met. We send them off with our blessing with the blessing of God in the hopes that these unknown...un-met children will be blessed by God as they embark on becoming part of the future of not just our community but of our world.

What words would you say - what blessing will you give to these children?

Many of these children know the fear that was intended to be struck through the hearts by the un-Godly hate last week in Charlottesville.

Many of their parents are afraid this will and can happen here in Delaware as people scout out Dover and Wilmington to repeat Charlottesville here in our home.

What words would you say - what blessing will you give these children?

There is very little doubt - in fact there is zero doubt in my heart and mind - that God has blessed you to be a blessing.

God is gracious and God's face shines upon us even in times when we least expect it. We praise God because we understand that with God things like racism and hate have no place here in our church or in our community.

For this I thank God for you and I know that together we can never let the blessing of the almighty go unheard or unshared. Because the goodness of God can overcome any evil that faces us and as you pick up a backpack today to help me bless it later...think of what blessing you wish to send...what you would say to that child...holding that backpack is as if you can, for a moment, hold that child close to your heart and remind them that God is love and love is God.

Will you pray with me?

God and gracious God,

Your face is made to shine on all your people in all corners of the earth.

Grant that we may know your ways and that your love may fill the hearts of all your people.

That as nations sing of your praises, your Holy Spirit casts out the son of racism and hate and guides those on this earth to peace and justice.

Give strength to your church here in Wilmington...increase in us our courage and strength to bless those in and around us.

In the name of Christ we pray.

Amen

At the blessing of the backpacks:

God, be present with the child that will wear this backpack. Grant that they may know and walk in your love and that they will be a blessing to all they encounter. Give them strength when they grieve give them courage when they fear and give them joy when their hearts are glad. We ask that you be gracious and bless these backpacks so that your face may be known to all nations and people on this

earth that your face will shine upon the one who wears this backpack and we pray you protect all children from hate and fear and grant them and us your blessings this day and forevermore.