

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 19—Year C
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28
Psalm 14
I Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

Today is a day for paradoxes and complexities. It's all through our lessons. **Jeremiah** and the **psalmist** paint a bleak, bleak picture of *a people* who have utterly messed things up, lost their way, a people who've become **skilled in doing evil but don't know how to do good**; they paint a picture of *individuals*, all of whom have proved **corrupt and commit abominable acts, none of whom can do any good, all of whom have proved faithless and eat upon God's people like bread**. Pretty dire picture of humanity, both collectively and individually.

There's that, and there's **Paul** who understands that, though he was **a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence, Christ Jesus our Lord had strengthened him, showed him mercy, judged him faithful, and appointed him to his service**. Paul's experience, messed up though he was, was that the **grace of our Lord overflowed for him with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus**. Paul is full of paradoxes, full of complexities. His being houses multitudes.

And the bleak picture of humanity painted by **Jeremiah** and the **psalmist** bumps up against our passage from **Luke 15** today. You've got the **righteous, upright Pharisees and scribes grumbling about the company Jesus keeps and irritated by how he welcomes tax collectors and sinners**—more messed up people in the scribes and Pharisees' eyes—and then you've got Jesus telling these two parables about **the shepherd who leaves the 99 to go for the one lost sheep and the woman who searches diligently to find that one lost silver coin that was precious to her**—both parables closing with **the joy that resounds in heaven over one sinner who repents than all those righteous ones who need no repentance**.

It's complicated—amidst all that is messed up and broken, there is also the possibility for mercy and repentance and faithfulness and service and being overcome, overflowed, with the faith and love that in Christ Jesus. As I move through the rest of this sermon, hold on to this.

Today is the 21st anniversary of 9/11, a day that changed us as a people. Amidst all the brokenness of lives lost and lives forever changed, amidst the sheer evil of what was unleashed against our nation that day, there is also the cost that reverberates still—a heightened fear of the other, a profound loss of innocence, a challenge to how we understand ourselves as a people, two wars with all the lives lost and wounds that come with war, and so much grief that we've never known what to do with. A day when we saw both the bleakest parts of humanity *and* also the most heroic; a day that tore a hole in our collective soul *and* also saw us come together as one. 9/11 and its aftermath are full of paradox and have so many layers of complexity. We can grieve the losses of 9/11 *and* also look clear-eyed at our responses that have been lifegiving, as well as those that have been costly.

And this past Thursday saw the death of Queen Elizabeth II, the longest reigning monarch in British history. Her death is complex. Amidst all the tributes, there is also the very real ambivalence about the monarchy—questioning its relevance, questioning its financial cost, critiquing the long-lasting impacts of colonization, the underside of Empire with its legacy of racism and the cost that always comes amidst the subjugation of other peoples—all of which gets laid upon the symbol of the Queen, and now, the King.

Yes, more layers of complexity, loads of paradox, and yes, such times of monumental transition call for monumental conversations that seek to tell the whole truth and not just the parts that we're comfortable

with.

But part of the complexity, part of embracing the paradox is also not losing sight of what is good and noble. On this day, I don't want to lose sight of Elizabeth, who she was and what she accomplished. We don't have cable, so I miss a lot of TV coverage around these kind of events, but I found myself rereading a book I first ran across at the SSJE retreat house when I made retreat there in 2017. It's called *The Servant Queen and the King she serves* by Mark Greene and Catherine Butcher. It's a tribute that was written for her 90th birthday, and it explores her faith and how her faith anchored her and sustained her throughout her 70 years of service. Much of what I am about to share I learned from this gem of a book.

And as Episcopalians, this matters to us. The Anglican Communion spans the world, and The Episcopal Church is the branch of the Anglican Communion that resides in the United States, as well as a few other places that fall under The Episcopal Church umbrella. By definition, the Queen is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England and Defender of the Faith, the Church of England being the church from whom the Anglican Communion spread out across the world. Where the British Empire went, so did its faith. With the counsel of the Prime Minister, the monarch appoints the Archbishop of Canterbury.

At Elizabeth II's coronation in 1952, there was one part of the ceremony that was not televised because it was considered too sacred, too holy a moment, and it was when the Archbishop of Canterbury anointed her with holy oil pouring it onto her hands, her chest, and her head to show that she was being set apart to serve and love her people in all her actions, with all her heart and with all her mind. She was vowing to serve her people as a servant of God.

And over the next 70 years, Elizabeth became the model of servant leadership.

She never went to university, but she was a lifelong learner, and an advisor and confidant to 15 Prime Ministers from Winston Churchill to Liz Truss with whom she met two days before her death—just think about that. She would read the Red Box, the papers from the Prime Minister's office and other governmental offices, every day. She met with the Prime Minister weekly, and they better have read all the Cabinet papers because she sure had and would ask her very adept and probing questions.

She could rebuild a 6-cylinder, 3462 cc Austin K2 Ambulance used during WWII; she employed 1,200 people but fed her own dogs.

She kept a grueling schedule for 70 years, and there are no reliable recorded incidents of her ever losing her temper, using bad language, or refusing to carry out a duty expected of her.

Her Christmas addresses were legendary, returning frequently to the themes of forgiveness and loving your neighbor; she was always calling her people to live out of their better selves.

In Sandringham, she would drive herself to local congregation of Sandringham Church for the Sunday service and enter quietly through the side door and sit down in a pew, never sitting in the seat reserved for the Queen—she was there simply to worship. Weekly worship was an integral in her rhythm of life. The Anglican tradition was in her bones, and she knew the Book of Common Prayer by heart.

There's something that happens when your prayers are committed to memory. They rise when you need them and sustain you when you don't know how to pray. And her Anglican faith also gave her a breadth and a capacity to keep growing, keep evolving.

She was steadfast and deeply committed to her faith, talking about her Lord and Savior easily and frequently, and yet her commitment to Jesus Christ never made her fearful of other faith traditions. The faith taught her to respect and honor those other faith traditions. Her heart was spacious; she understood that **in the Father's house there are many mansions**. This is such a different approach to other faiths than we often see in our country where there can be such fear of the other.

Think about the change she witnessed across her 70-year reign, just think about it; it's staggering. In addition to providing constancy and stability, her faith gave her a generosity of spirit and allowed her to keep stretching and growing and evolving, and so she was also a unifying force for her people as they became ever more multi-cultural and multi-faith.

And she and her family were full of paradoxes and complexities. The Royal Family scandals are legend in the British tabloids, but I don't wonder if scandal is just another word for brokenness that is lived in the spotlight of the public eye. Yes, her family has had their share of divorces and betrayals; they've known brokenness and tragedy; acts have been committed for which members must be held accountable. In other words, the Queen's family is no different than yours or mine. We all have our share of brokenness in our family trees.

And through it all, her faith sustained her.

Elizabeth always knew that, in the end, her task was to serve—Acts of Service truly was Elizabeth's love language—but she also knew the results were not in her hands. She said this in 2002: *"I know just how much I rely on my faith to guide me through the good times and the bad. Each day is a new beginning. I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings, and to put my trust in God...I draw strength from the message of hope in the Christian gospel."*

Perhaps that was her secret; she put her trust in God, and she never lost sight of hope.

Elizabeth is part of that Greatest Generation—those born 1901-1927. There aren't many of them left now. These are the qualities of that generation: humility, work ethic, frugality, commitment, integrity, self-sacrifice. She embodied all of these. Add to these her generosity of spirit, her inquiring mind, her sense of tradition, her constancy and consistency and stability and steadfastness, her capacity to keep growing and learning and evolving, and her deep and abiding commitment to service. Are not these qualities that we desperately need in our world just now?

I don't think the paradoxes inherent in living life nor the complexities of our world ever frightened Elizabeth—she knew who she was; she knew what was hers to do; and she was rooted in a deeper place.

In the burial office, we pray that *"in death, life is changed, not ended."* If we think Elizabeth's going to stop her life of service, we're sorely mistaken. Elizabeth lives now in the communion of saints, and from that land of eternal light and joy, she invites us, all of us, to think about the values, the deep values, that anchor us and sustain us and animate us. She invites us to the practice of forgiveness and love of neighbor. She invites us to go deep, deep into our faith, to commit it to our heart, to trust in our Lord and Savior, to be bold but not imposing as we witness to Jesus, and to commit our life to his service in the service of others. She invites us to keep learning, keep growing, keep evolving, and to be curious about others honoring their dignity and their way of life different though it may be from ours.

The world is full of paradox and complexity—Elizabeth invites us to take the long-view and to know that we can weather whatever comes with grace and mercy and dignity and strength.

I want to close with a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins that Elizabeth's father, King George VI, read in his Christmas Day address in 1939. Britain had been at war with Germany for three months, and with the wounds of WWI so fresh in Britain's memory, the King was wrestling with how to speak a word of hope to his people. What many don't know is that it was Elizabeth, just 13 years old, who handed this poem to her father, thinking it might be of help to him. It goes like this:

*I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year
'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.'
And he replied,
'Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light,
and safer than a known way.'*

These words were written on Elizabeth's heart and lived out across her long and fruitful life. Today, in this world with all its brokenness and paradox and complexity, may these words be written on our hearts and made flesh in our lives as well. Amen.

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The Collect

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

The First Lesson—Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse-- a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.

"For my people are foolish,
they do not know me;
they are stupid children,
they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil,
but do not know how to do good."
I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.
I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.

Because of this the earth shall mourn,
and the heavens above grow black;
for I have spoken, I have purposed;
I have not relented nor will I turn back.

The Psalm

Psalm 14

Dixit insipiens

- 1 The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." *
All are corrupt and commit abominable acts;
there is none who does any good.
- 2 **The LORD looks down from heaven upon us all, ***
to see if there is any who is wise,
if there is one who seeks after God.
- 3 Every one has proved faithless;
all alike have turned bad; *
there is none who does good; no, not one.
- 4 **Have they no knowledge, all those evildoers ***
who eat up my people like bread
and do not call upon the LORD?
- 5 See how they tremble with fear, *
because God is in the company of the righteous.

**6 Their aim is to confound the plans of the afflicted, *
but the LORD is their refuge.**

7 Oh, that Israel's deliverance would come out of Zion! *
when the LORD restores the fortunes of his people,
Jacob will rejoice and Israel be glad.

The Second Lesson—1 Timothy 1:12-17

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

The Gospel— Luke 15:1-10

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."