

1st Sunday after Pentecost (2020)

Genesis 1:1—2:4a

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

*God gets up in the morning and says, "Another day?"
 God goes to work every day at regular hours.
 God is no gentleman, for God puts on overalls and gets dirty
 running the universe we know about
 and several other universes nobody knows about but Him.*

"God Is No Gentleman",
 Carl Sandburg

(*Honey and Salt* [Harcourt & Brace, 1963], p. 39)

There is a beauty to the poetry of reading from the Bible from the Book of Genesis, but as our paraphrase of that passage suggests today, creation and what-was-to-be the universe before it was created was anything but beautiful. "In the beginning there was God... and a mess." "Icky, gooey, sharp, prickly." Things you could bump into and then, in contrast, God.

There are other universes that only God and those who inhabit them are aware of. Life can be a jumbled, chaotic mess. Every human being faces times in which everything seems to be coming apart at the seams. Some of our times of trial seem to come out of nowhere. Tragedy simply strikes. A person is fired from his or her job. An accident happens. A disease takes hold in a body. A child disappears. A spouse dies suddenly. A tornado hits. A war breaks out. A person becomes the victim in an act of violence.

Other periods of uncertainty and strife can be predicted. The human life cycle takes each of us on a journey of growth and transition. We leave the dark, watery security of our mother's womb by violently passing through the birth canal and out into a bright, noisy, frightening world. We start out as completely dependent, helpless infants feeding on the milk of our mother's breast, but in a short time, we are introduced to solid food. We change from being swaddled babies into crawlers, walkers, skippers, and dancers. We learn to take care of ourselves.

As we develop into teenagers, we hear an inner voice speaking an urgent message to us: it beckons us to become more and more independent, to break away from our parents, to rebel against our dependence on them, and make our own way in the world. Until finally, one day, we begin making decisions for ourselves. We may choose to confirm our faith. Some families celebrate our newfound adulthood with a bar mitzvah or a quinceañera. We get a driver's license. We graduate from high school, a celebration, yes, but

also a very uncertain and, for some, frightening time. We leave the nest to launch out on our own.

Eventually some of us fall in love, find a person to share life with, and start a family of our own. Others among us decide to enjoy a life of independence and fulfillment in singleness. As adults, we begin building our own networks of support. We choose our own friends and groups with whom we want to affiliate. And many of us find a community in which to practice our faith.

Each one of these life transitions requires us to renegotiate our relationships and our place in the world. The changes we face as we grow and develop and transition through the human lifespan throw us into periods of jumbled, chaotic mess.

We are fortunate if we emerge into the next stage unscathed, but do any of us ever emerge unscathed?

The hope of many is to find a sanctuary where we can be safe, but, in a world of pandemic and social distancing, life is not safe. Even in places of safety, there are risks. That's why we need the church. Part of the work of the church is to equip and support individuals as they live into God's unique call and purpose for their lives. The community of faith promises to love people from the womb to the tomb and through all points in between, including during all those pesky transitions. In the vows we make at our baptisms, we commit to care for one another in Jesus' holy church, and by our teaching and example, guide one another toward accepting God's grace, professing faith, and leading Christian lives.

Sometimes this work is challenging. It is hard for us, flawed humans that we are, to live in the image of God's identity as a community of loving, interdependent people.

Sometimes God blesses individuals with identities or calls them to actions that other people of faith find difficult to nurture. Sometimes church members commit heinous acts against other church members or against people in the world around us. Sometimes the transitions that individuals make through the life cycle are not made easily or willingly. Sometimes transition comes as the result of violence or abuse, war-making, problematic cultural practices, or natural disaster.

How does the church support individuals at points of transition?

How do transitions break relationships?

How do those get re-formed?

What gets lost along the way? What is gained?

The creation story from the Book of Genesis calls us back to our core identity. Before anything else, we know that we are made in the image of

God. In his letters to the Corinthian church, Paul calls them to the work of living with that reflection of God in daily life. Any kind of shared life -- church, family, school, friendship -- can develop us into more tolerant, patient, and loving people, better than we would be alone. It can also call up our deepest fear and anger and petty selfishness and bring out the worst in our behavior.

With all of our deep needs and deeply held beliefs, how are we to follow Paul's instruction to "put things in order, agree with one another, and live in peace"?

Examples of what *not* to do abound. We could spend the rest of the hour and more listing the things we shouldn't do and the things that continue to make messes of our relationship to God and with each other. Both readings today are about relationships: God's relationship with His created world and creatures and our relationships with each other.

You may have heard and remember that in God's creation process, God gives human beings the task, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Dominion does not mean to abuse creation and to do whatever we want. Dominion is stewardship – taking care of.

We all know what it means to take care of something or someone. We take care of our business or our job, our schoolwork or our families. We take care of our homes and cars. We know what it's like to take care of our church building, but it also means taking care of the people who make up the church and the relationships we have with them.

Harmony. That's what Paul was requesting. Agree with each other, live in peace. In our paraphrase from 2 Corinthians today, we heard "Greet each other warmly in the Lord." Paul actually wrote, "Greet each other with a holy kiss" but we don't now and never did as much kissing as some other countries and cultures. And now our smiles hide behind masks, we stand 6 ft. apart, and only the brave or the foolish kiss, hug or even fist-bump.

Paul's point is to head off what he knew perfectly well would happen anyway in many churches: disagreements and conflict. Just because we're Christians doesn't mean we immediately give up our ego-centered bad habits. But we must try, and the ideal church is one in which we have mutual respect for each other, are able to present our opinions with gentleness, and understand that we cannot always have our way but must act for the good of the whole, those with whom we share a life or a church and with those who come after us.

Three weeks ago, we heard the story about the stoning of Stephen. We can read about how even the heroes of the Bible, Abraham, Moses, David,

Solomon, most of the prophets, John the Baptist, Peter and Paul, the early church and certainly, Jesus, faced times of jumble and chaos in their relationships with God and with others of God's people. Their struggles – their moments of jumbled, chaotic mess—are recorded in the Bible. It has happened throughout all of history, that people have trouble getting along – even God's people – then and in our churches today.

Into each of these stories of jumbled, chaotic mess we will hear the voice of God speaking light and life and love and hope.

Sometimes God's words will bring comfort—God brings order to the chaos. Other times, God speaks demands that make us uncomfortable and raise difficult questions about the nature of our faith—questions for which we do not have easy answers.

Just as the presence of God was a constant in the lives of our ancestors in the faith, so too the presence of God is a constant in our own lives, through the good times and the bad.

The good news is God is with us, speaking light and live, love and hope, into the murky, jumbled, chaotic mess of the world. In fact, it is often in the chaos itself where the work of God happens most profoundly. When life feels messy, look for signs of God hard at work and share the signs!

As you leave the house in the morning, as you leave work at the end of your shift, as you part from your spouse or family or friends, your last words are lasting words. You may have played the "if you could only take three items with you" game some time in your life. What last words would you say to people who are important to you? What will people remember about how you parted from them the last time you met?

Let's listen again to the Apostle Paul's last words to the Corinthians:

1. Rejoice.
 2. Grow up in Christ.
 3. Be comforted.
 4. Live in harmony and peace.
- And may the God of love and peace be with you.
12. Greet each other warmly in the Lord.

Perhaps this is the way to continue God's work of creation, to continue putting things in order and bringing light where there is darkness? Perhaps this is the way to live as those who are created in God's image: to continue "getting the jumble out of the mess and making more room for more life to dance." Talking the way God talks and acting the way God acts is the way for us to say also "This, what we are creating with God, is very good."