



SAINT LUKE'S

THE 19TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
PROPER 21, YEAR B

NUMBERS 11:4-6,10-16,24-29

PSALM 19:7-14

JAMES 5:13-20

MARK 9:38-50

A SERMON BY THE REV. WILLIAM OGBURN
SEPTEMBER 30, 2018

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is a beautiful film from 1997 with Glenn Close and Frances McDormand called *Paradise Road*. It's about a group of women who have been evacuated from Singapore at the beginning of the Second World War, but who are captured along their way and taken as Prisoners of War to the Island of Sumatra. It's based on their real story of survival and how they form a vocal orchestra to relieve their misery and endure until they are finally liberated. In the middle of the film, many of the younger women are offered a very different life, away from the misery of the camp - and are invited to enjoy once again the fineries of life like delicious food, soap, and exuberant housing, but in exchange for being mistresses to the Japanese soldiers. Some choose to go; and others make the decision to continue to bear the burden and hardship of the Prisoner of War life and to endure through the power of music and community.

It's rather like today's reading from Numbers. Numbers is a book all about the time in the wilderness for the Israelites after escaping Egypt. Today, we hear them whingeing about how good they had it when they were slaves in Egypt compared to wandering around in the desert for so many years and eating this strange manna from heaven every day. They want to go back to the 'good ole days' when 'slavery was great' and there was an abundance of meat and fish, of cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. It's as they are saying that slavery had more advantages than freedom. And sometimes, it surely can feel that way. There are things in life that we fear if we let go of we will never get back again, but perhaps they are the very same things that hold us back and keep us from living the fullest and best life in God on this

side of eternity.

Liberty is the birthright of all of God's children in this world. Freedom is God's design and desire for us. Enslavement comes in many forms, whether physically owning and abusing other people, human trafficking, sexual assault, blackmailing, financial entrapments, addiction etc. These abominable exploitations rob people of their freedom, dignity, happiness. It's manipulative, abusive, and the very opposite of what God desires for us in this world.

Freedom has costs. Freedom sometimes means giving up on something immediately, perhaps like leeks and onions, or soap and a comfy bed, in order to realize the greater good. Sometimes we have to be very vulnerable and use our freedom to defend the freedom of others. Sometimes we have to stand up and speak truth to power, even when we are terrified. I am particularly grateful this week for the witness of Dr Christine Blasey Ford as coming forth as a victim of sexual assault. Her bravery in sharing her story has helped and emboldened many other victims to tell their stories too. And while it doesn't undo anything of the past, it can be the beginning of healing ~ and just as importantly, it can be the beginning of breaking such vicious cycles of oppression and degradation by holding those who victimize others accountable.

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks in hyperbole, in exaggerated statements, about removing the things in our lives that get between us and God. If there is something in our life that is preventing us from loving God and loving our neighbor, we need to remove it from our life. It's about holiness of life

before God and about how what we do for each other we also do for God. In our epistle today, James is deeply concerned with how followers of Jesus act ~ and how they care for each other in community. James tells us how prayer is essential for communities centered around Jesus ~ and that prayer is what brings us healing and wholeness because it is what ultimately brings us closer to God day by day. Prayer has the power to transform our lives and strengthen us to do God's will.

All of our lessons today share a common theme ~ and one that we are also celebrating here at St Luke in the Fields this week: that theme is stewardship. In the Book of Numbers, we have to be good stewards of our freedom and the freedom of others. Enslavement and exploitation of any kind is not God's design for creation. And as stewards of God's creation with an Easter-minded ethic, we are called to help put things to right. Numbers is also a stewardship lesson in sharing responsibility. In James, we are called to be stewards of prayer. We are to take care of the sick, to heal, to pray for one another, to confess our sins to each other and to be strengthened by the truth of the Good News of Jesus Christ and to share that same Good News with others. We are to stand up for each other and defend those who cannot defend themselves and we are called to speak truth to power. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus commands us to be good stewards of our souls. We learn from Jesus that we have to do the hard work of eliminating and purging from our lives the things that get between us and God. Perhaps it's our ego, or perhaps our it's our pride, or our ambition, or our attitude. Maybe it's our fear of being wrong or perhaps it's even our shame. Jesus gives us permission...actually he commands us... to cut all of that from our lives...all that stuff that gets in our way of following where he leads us. What we do with our lives and how we treat one

another matters...and it especially matters to God.

Our use of time, talent, and treasure is a reflection of how we prioritize and organize our lives. And this year, as we kick off stewardship season at St Luke in the Fields, I hope we can think about what it means to be a steward of this place. For now, it's our responsibility. Those in the past have done their part and those in the future will hopefully do theirs. But today, here and now, it is our responsibility to care for this parish, which is not just the people who come here to worship God, but all who come through our doors. We are not just stewards of this building or stewards of bank accounts; we are stewards of each other, as James reminds us, who keep each other in the light and truth of Jesus in this community.

As a symbol of our stewardship of this parish, on Sunday 28th October, we will have an *Ingathering Sunday*, where in which all who wish will bring their sealed stewardship pledge forms for 2019 and turn them in together as a symbol of our collective efforts to be stewards of St Luke in the Fields. For those who do these kinds of things online or by mail, you will be given a token of some kind that you can put in that day representing your pledge card. Whichever way you choose to participate, it is most important that we do this together as a community. It is an offering of who we are together as followers of Jesus, who continue to commit our lives to the service of Jesus, who is the great steward of our souls, and who gave up his life and his everything that we might have eternal and abundant life in God.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

THE CHURCH OF ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
487 HUDSON STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10014

TEL: 212.924.0562

FAX: 212. 633.2098

WEB SITE: WWW.STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG

EMAIL: INFO@STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG