

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“From ... To”

A sermon by Cheryl Henry

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

October 8, 2017

Genesis 1-2.4a

From to

SOoo, most of you know I had a Sabbatical this summer.

It was my first in 30 years of ordained ministry

And it was GREAT!

VERY glad for the experience.

Glad for the things we saw.

All that we were privileged to learn.

All the once-in-a-lifetime experiences Andy and Sam and I had.

SO thankful to God and the Lily Foundation

and to Efland Presbyterian Church and to you

for the gift of this time!

And as today's scripture text points out so powerfully,

taking a rest, time off and time away - Sabbath rest

despite what our 24/7 culture wants us to believe –

is the way we should be running our world.

I am profoundly glad I got this rest.

And I can only want it for each of you too;

because I believe it is the way God's wants us to live –
for our own good and the good of the whole.
We all need to seize and savor the world!
In about a 1 to 7 proportion.

And that is a word from God,
that 3 months ago (before my sabbatical)
I would have predicted I would preach to you today.
But I have to tell you that,
as I come to you this morning
with this scripture lesson in hand for today
----the Holy Spirit is whispering something else in my ear.

That whisper came to me when I recently learned that
Genesis 1 makes abundant use of a language form
grammarians call "merismus."¹

Merismus.

Anyone know this word?
Merismus is the word that describes
a way of speaking that we all have used
and heard used
in our lives.

It is a language form whereby
we use opposite extremes to convey a larger whole.

For example.

I bet Sarah and Pete
have said to little Sadie
more than once in her short life:
"I love you to the moon and back!"

¹ Scott Hozee on the website "Excellence in Preaching" for January 5, 2015. And from Alex Stayer-Brewington who told me about his learning of this in his Old Testament class during his time with EPC as an Intern.

Any United States patriots here
ever sung:
From California to the New York island
this land was made for you and me?

Well, if you have used such language
then you have used
the language form called Merismus.

Merismus is any time
I'm talking
and as I tell you about the thing I'm talking about
I say that it is everything FROM this thing here (*point*)
TO this thing here (*point*).

But when I say that,
the thing of which I am speaking
isn't just those two points,
but really I'm using those two points to say
that this thing
is everything in between those two points (*indicate with gesture*).
Got that?!

So in Genesis,
God creates day and night
we instantly understand that does not mean
that God created only two things – day and night,
but rather God has created all light and dark.

That God has created day and night
and every variation of day and night light
between those two extremes.
God created dawn and mid-morning
and high noon and dusk – cloudy light and shadow light

and the light that happens under shade trees.
Moon light and eclipse light.
Black as night moonless night light.

Genesis uses the language form of merismus
because it would just take too long – infinitely long --
to try to say every part of a whole creation God created
And so the writer – uses the merismus shorthand of
naming the extremes
that then allows us, with our experience and imagination,
to understand all the middle those extremes encompass.
God creates
sky and water – and everything in between.

God creates soil and living plants – and everything in between.

God creates cattle and creeping things,
winged things and swimming things –
and everything those represent.
Finally God creates
humans from male to female – and again,
we can assume everything in between.
(And if you are a scientist, or just a person,
you know that there are things between full male and full female.)

I bring you this word from God
this morning
because I need to tell you
that during our 6 weeks from Durham to Madrid to London
and all that happened between those places –
we experienced a lot of God's in between.
Joy, sorrow, hope, love.

And, in case you might not think of it or imagine it
one of the things we experienced?
Homesickness!

It sounds so silly when I say it.

But it was true!

Like any typical newly-minted 2nd week college freshman,
it happened to us and all we could only wonder was
what you would think of us, if we ditched our adventure
and came home.

We asked ourselves,

What exactly did we miss??

It wasn't our bed, surely.

Not our house –

that place with a summer lawn

that would need mowing?! Definitely not.

So, what was it for heaven's sake?

Well, I think in the end we missed

our place within a whole that we knew.

You see our from here (*point*)

to there (*point*) had stretched!

It had gotten bigger on the outside

but, we had not caught up on the inside.

Something was dying in us and something was being born,

and the disorientation it didn't feel good.

At least not in the moment.

On the Camino it was described more bluntly.

On Camino we heard people tell us again and again

(always in the same seriously foreboding voice),

“At some point the Camino will break you.”

When I got home

I read a book on Celtic Spirituality and pilgrimage.²

In the Celtic Christian tradition of our faith –

I learned that pilgrimage

was actually considered to be a type of martyrdom.

A way of living by taking on death

and trusting in resurrection.

I would probably call it Christian discipleship

rather than martyrdom, but I understand the word choice.

And, here's something else that was new to me,

and maybe it will be to you too –

according to the Celtic Christians

there were 3 colors of Christian martyrdom.

They are **red**

-which stands for what we all probably associate with
the word "martyrdom."

It means literal dying in and for faith.

Green.

Which you'll be happy to know

(or maybe not!)

is the sort of discipleship that you all

(and me too now that I am off pilgrimage)

are actively in right now.

This is the discipleship (or martyrdom)

of daily living the faith

in the place where we are.

² The following about martyrdom came to me from Esther DeWaal's book [Every Earthly Blessing: Rediscovering the Celtic Tradition](#) p. 102 ff.

And finally,

the last sort of or martyrdom is **white**.

And this is the martyrdom of pilgrimage.

This is what Andy, Sam and I
unknowingly took on when we became
homesick pilgrims on the Camino.

White martyrdom

is what we signed up for
when we felt God call us to leave kith and kin
and the comforts of home
to don a smaller load and hit the road
to become a stranger (an outsider)
to ourselves and others.

I think truthfully,

this white discipleship is the martyrdom
of many of our so-called “vacations.”

Ever had a vacation that didn't bring you home

with at least one soul stretching story to add to the family lore?

On sabbatical

unbeknownst to us,
our martyrdom colors
changed on us.

Suddenly, we were “white” pilgrims;
strangers in a strange land.

Living as simply as we could with
3 shirts and 3 pairs of pants – rotated ad nauseum.

It was the pangs of traveling as white pilgrims
coming from a green pilgrim world
that caused our homesickness.

Everything we saw
reminded of the home we had left
or of someone
who would have enjoyed seeing what we were seeing.
Sheep and cows had me taking pictures for Karen –
one of my Efland farmers.

Barbara, you and Scott could not have imagined the size
of some of the collard greens we saw . . . or the slugs!
I couldn't help but think of you all
as we gazed upon the beautiful stained glass windows
at the Cathedral in Leon!
And the monks singing in Rabanal?
Oh choir! I wish you had heard them!

Over 200,000 persons complete
their Camino pilgrimage
every year.
Their presence creates great revenue
from which some towns greatly benefit – full BnB's
and crowded cafes are a boon for them!

But for other towns,
those really tee tiny ones between the bigger ones,
well, pilgrims on the Camino,
white disciple of Christ though many profess to be,
were mostly the folk
who used their bushes and trees as public toilets
- a necessity that neither they,
nor the pilgrims who are in need, can avoid.

From our perspective we were “white” pilgrims;
sent on a journey by Christ.
From their perspective we were tourists
helping or taking over their town.

Thus, some (*point one extreme*) loved us
and some (*point other extreme*) despised us
and some (*gesture between two extremes*)
were ambivalent about us.

The stories on the Camino told of miracles –
addicts who left their addictions behind
and became angels of mercy to others.

On our “good way” -- our Buen Camino
(the greeting everyone
offers each other while walking)
we heard of and experienced many holy miracles
of loving kindness
that happened to people,
and between people, on and after the walking.

In our white pilgrimage discipleship/martyrdom,
we learned to appreciate a different rhythm of life.

Up by 5:15 a.m. Toileting and packing for the day.
We said our prayers and hit the road by 6:15.
Walking,
and then walking more
we saw amazingly beautiful landscapes.
Had conversations – with each other and strangers.
Walked silently for hours.
Peered into church – humble and grand.
Paused at Prayer crosses everywhere!
Cafes and water stops.
An irrigation trough of cool water to stick our feet in.

By 2 p.m. walking was done and the long afternoon
yawned before us like some undefined monster.

Too tired to walk more
we washed our laundry and our bodies.
We journaled and read.
And still supper was hours away. Our stomachs growled waiting.
The sun which did not go down until almost 11 p.m.
seemed to conspire against us
ever resting for the night.

The time between sunrise
and sunset forced us to deal with time itself.
It was a new and difficult spiritual exercise for us.

And when we got to the U.K.
our routine changed yet again.
No two days the same. This is the life of white martyrdom!

I suppose when I think of why we were homesick
it was the unfamiliar patterns and places and people.
The strangers we were to ourselves
as people NOT working exactly, but
certainly not idle.

Now, this IS coming back to Genesis !
Because, in the end,
the thing that was our constant comfort was this Genesis 1
merismus that we experienced in our travel.
It was a sure knowledge that kept reassuring us wherever we were.
God created this world;
this WHOLE world.
From Durham and Efland
to Galacia and Conwy.
From RDU to Heathrow
this is God's world.

And thus it is our world too.

we were at home whether we felt at home or not
because we were in God's home.

And as children of God

whether in Efland or in Edinburgh.

we only needed to accept that between here and there
all was God's.

Again and again we came to understand

that we could not get lost from our Creator.

And this is where I would have stopped this sermon

had not the events of the last week forced me.

So!

One more Camino story.

and I'll finish up.

One day on the way,

we came across a cartoon.

In the single paneled drawing,

two persons sat calm and satisfied

on one end of a boat high above the water

while at the other end of the same boat (the lower end naturally)

a hole was leaking water

as 3 persons frantically bailed water.

In the cartoon's caption,

one of the two on the high end of the boat;

the "easier" end of the boat,

says to his friend,

"How lucky we are we that the leak is on the other side."

That cartoon reminds me that sometimes,
like this week, you don't have to go anywhere
to realize that the leak in OUR boat
is not someone else's problem alone.

The suffering we have all
listened to and seen out of Las Vegas –
and in the aftermath of the hurricanes and earthquakes--
reminds me that we are all in the same boat.

And when this end talks to that end --
it is clear that our boat is leaking, badly!
Threateningly. And we all are involved.

Of course we can debate about
why the boat is leaking.
Makes sense to do that. And we do.

Is the boat leaking at God's design?

Is the leak of our own making?

Is our leaking boat
the work of a wicked snake
(or termite or some other such natural creature)
that has crawled on board
and begun wreaking havoc by chewing on the boards
and maybe a human heart or two?

Is there some other explanation
for why an otherwise good creation has "leaks"?

I don't want to travel too far into Genesis 2 territory this morning
but with all that has happened in the last few weeks
I thought I could not but mention

that from here to there
regardless of why or how
we all know our world isn't perfect.

But wait, did I say OUR world?

Genesis 1 corrects me on that one.
For this is our world only because it
is first God's world.

And despite its leaks ours' is a God
who still wants to assure us that this boat – THIS boat
from beginning to end
is God's boat.

God made it.

And this boat and the very sea it is on
is in our Creator's good, loving, wise and holy hands.

As a white martyrs/pilgrims/disciples of Christ
and green –
and even red --

since with death we all take a turn at that one too

As a pilgrim of every color
from the day of our baptism and even the day of our births,
it seems to me,
that God is always bringing this point home.

Always showing us,
that this is God's world first.

We and others can borrow it for a time, but!

Everything that is, is God's.

From here to there -- horizontal and vertical too!

And we are God's
from the greatest to the least.

From the top of our tippytop of our wee little heads
to the bottoms of our crusty gross feet.
From the Mother Teresas of this world to the Stephan Paddocks?

Well, what can we say,
except that Genesis 1 tells us not to be afraid
of any of the extremes or of the all that is in between.
For all is in God's hands.

Sisters, Brothers, and everyone in between,
When you are homesick.
Or heartsick.
When the world is leaking – especially when the world is
leaking.
It is absolutely critical
and of the most profound importance,
for us as people of faith to
hold onto these first truths .

In the beginning God created.
It may be the only words of the Bible we need to know.³
No wonder the Gospel writer of John
picks it up again.

In the beginning God created.
And God said, it was good.
From this to that.

And though there are questions – LOTS of questions.
Lots to talk about on the pilgrim journey.
None of them will negate this truth.

³ This idea comes from Scott Hozee's January 5, 2015 commentary on this passage found at the website "Excellence in Preaching."

Every day – every evening and morning
is God's good day. The Bible tells us so.
From the very beginning it tells us so.
And all the way through
and to it's very end, Scripture assures us
that God has not and will not walk away from what God created.
It's what we hold on to on our best days
and what we hold in faithful trust
to remind each other of on our worst.

Through all our pilgrimage walks– red, white and green
God in Christ Jesus and with the Holy Wind at our backs
walks beside us
showing us the way
because God knows the way
from here (*point*)
to there (*point*).
Because if he didn't
how would we walk at all?

Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

© FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 2017. FOR PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY.