

## ***SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST***

*Genesis 28:10-19a, Psalm 139: 1...24; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43*

Who are you? “Who are your people?” is usually the first question we ask a new person. We assume the person we’re talking to has a family, a place to belong, and we don’t know how to respond if a person says, “I don’t know, I was brought up in a foster home”.

If we’re caring people, we feel for people who find themselves adrift and alone for whatever reason, because that sense of belonging is so important to us as human beings. If we’re honest, we have all probably had a time in our lives when we felt completely alone, cut off even from family and friends? If we have ever felt that way it’s really hard. What do we do? Some despair, others stay wrapped in anger, others hang in with hope. How do we choose? Lots of questions that may be overwhelming.

Are they unanswerable questions? Not at all, because all of our readings today give us a reason to hope by offering us ways to have relationships with others, even when we’re not relatives. Being part of God’s family is what each reading today is all about. Paul gives a wonderful definition of how we belong to God’s family. “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption.

When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if

in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

There we have it! None of us ever need to fear being completely alone, even if we don’t have an earthly family. We all are part of God’s family, we can be absolutely sure that, as the Spirit of God is within every single one of us, we are brothers and sisters of Christ and heirs of God’s glory. Paul also reminds us that this family connection doesn’t break down when we suffer. Christ suffered, we suffer, but we are not left alone as he was not left alone.

Despite this, we still wonder about suffering, don’t we? When people get sick, or we see people’s suffering, we often hear things said like, “God never gives you more than you can handle” or “This suffering will make you a stronger person.”

But, think about how some people react to suffering they think is brought on by a person’s bad life choices. A homeless person asks for some change, a single mother with children is getting welfare, a young man who’s just gotten out of jail can’t find a job, that’s their problem, isn’t it? We often hear some people say, “It’s their own fault,” or “They’re lazy,” or “My hard-earned taxes have been supporting that bum in jail, he doesn’t deserve a break.”

If we’re really honest about it, the homeless and poor, and those who have made bad choices are still children of God, our brothers and sisters, and we must be willing to love them and reach out as we’re able.

What Paul shares with us, is that God is with every one of us through whatever happens in our human lives, whether we acknowledge God’s presence or not. God is present no matter what, and waits for us to say yes to that presence. God is a very patient and loving God.

We might think that it all sounds too easy, that we don't have to worry about anything but knowing God's Spirit is within us, and we're all set. Of course, we know better.

The wonderful story of Jacob's dream in Genesis gives us a place to start thinking about our responsibility as children of God: "He dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!" What a wonderful dream! Jacob realizes what a powerful message was in that dream and so he set up a pillar, an altar, and gave it a name, Bethel, setting that place aside as a holy place. Jacob received his own message from God in that dream, the promise of a family that would reach far and wide, even down through generations. The promise of family was as important then as it is for us today.

We're also offered a message in this reading. That ladder connecting heaven and earth is there for us. As those angels are going up and down, connecting humanity to heaven, so we who say we are Jesus' followers, must be like those angels. We must be people who play a part in connecting the world with heaven by the way we live our lives.

Now that sounds like work, and of course it is. Being human, living in a very human world will have its hard days, lots of them. If we're serious about claiming to be Christian, then we must accept that angelic role.

What it means for us is, that what sounds like work, is actually our ministry. Each one of us has been given some talent, some gift or ability, that we can use as we travel up and down that figurative ladder between heaven and earth. Each of us is called to be a messenger of God's love to others. For some, doing missionary work is their gift. For others, it may be sharing a

talent, or offering hope to someone with problems. There are certainly millions of ways pleasing to the God who lives within us.

Hard work or easy, whatever our gift, whatever our own suffering may be, we can be sure we're never alone. God's promise is all through both the Old and New Testament, but the way it's described in Jacob's dream is especially lovely:

“Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you.”

We might look at that land God promises us as eternal life. Here God promises to be with us and keep us. God promises to stay with us until we are with God in eternity. That's a promise and a source of strength for us that's as awesome as Jacob's experience of God was for him.

We Christians are all very fortunate, because when someone asks us about our family, we can all say, “My family is all God's people and we have God's promise that we will never be alone.”

**AMEN.**