

October 10th, 2021
Year B; 20th Pentecost
Amos 5: 6-7, 10-15
Psalm 90: 12-17
Mark 10: 17-31

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

Tim and I took a 3-night getaway this week, driving up to Gettysburg for one night, and then 2 nights in New York to visit our dear friend Glenda, after a 2 year absence from face to face visits due to COVID.

We stop in Gettysburg because it is a convenient halfway point in the 440 mile trip to Glenda's farm in New York, and because Tim has long enjoyed studying and reading and touring all things from the Civil War.

As we drove north on Wednesday, I recalled our first trip together to Gettysburg, about 10 years ago. Our friends Paul and Sharon, had invited us to go to Gettysburg with them at about this time of year, to see the fall colors, and to stop at the apple orchards along Route 15. I was thrilled by this invitation because Paul, like Tim, is a fan of touring Civil War battlefields. I don't hate touring battlefields, but.....well, after a few tours, everything starts looking the same to me.

So, on our first full day there, Sharon and I joyfully dropped Tim and Paul off at the front door of the Gettysburg National Civil War Center and happily went off to shop antiques for Sharon's shop and to have lunch out. I noticed as we dropped the fellas off, other wives dropping off their husbands, big grins on their faces too!

However, on a second trip to Gettysburg a few years later, I found that Gettysburg is different, not like other battlefields I have trudged around with Tim, and I have slowly become a bittersweet fan of Gettysburg.

As you likely know, the battle at Gettysburg did not happen out in the country, in a field with only an occasional farmhouse in the midst. At Gettysburg, the battle took place in and around the town. The fierce horror of war was not distant, but literally on the doorsteps of the residents.

This proximity to the battle has created at today's Gettysburg a blend of commercial kitsch and still present grief that is jarring and hard to ignore. As we drove into Gettysburg for this visit, I noticed the number of businesses with the word "battlefield" as part of their commercial appeal, Battlefield Resort Campground and a restaurant advertising "battlefield fries".

At the same time, you can't drive or walk a city block in Gettysburg without a sign telling

you want happened on this spot. Outside a restaurant Tim and I like (Appalachian Brew Pub; no battlefield foods available there) there is a sign entitled “A Tale of Two Brothers”. The sign tells the story of the Culp brothers. The sign opens with the sentence:

“When Abraham Lincoln spoke of ‘a house divided’ he might well have referenced the sons of Easias Jesse and Margaret Sutherland Culp.”

Both boys, William born in 1831 and Wesley born in 1839 grew up in Gettysburg, and both were employed by the carriagemaker Charles Hoffman.

In 1856 Hoffman moved his business to Martinsburg VA and Welsey went with him, but William stayed in Gettysburg.

When the war broke out, Wesley enlisted for the south and William the north. Their regiments did meet once at the 2nd Battle of Winchester in June 1863, but neither was wounded there. However, in that strangely personal quality of battle back then, Wesley recognized a Gettysburg friend among the enemy. The friend asked Wesley to take a note to his girl back in Gettysburg, and Wesley agreed to deliver the note. But Wesley never made it home as he was killed a few weeks later on July 2nd at the battle of Culp’s Farm. Wesley like so many others was buried in an unmarked grave. He was 24 years old.

William survived the war and was buried in Evergreen Cemetery in the middle of Gettysburg, in a large “Culp” family plot. But as the sign noted at the conclusion of this “brother against brother” story, the family plot is, “where Wesley’s absence serves as a silent reminder to the personal cost of conflict.”

This sign, outside the brewpub, keeps the civil war and the so personal quality of the battles ever present, if tourists want to remember or not.

As we walked and read in Gettysburg, I could not help but think of our own conflicts today in the United States, our own “brother against brother”, sister against sister” vicious disagreements, family splitting pain as we Americans seem more enthralled with the energizing rush of fighting, than with the slow and thoughtful work of compromise.

I hear folks speak of our country being again on the brink of civil war in our current arguments about everything: vaccines and masks, Afghanistan and free community college for all.

We seem enthralled with fighting. Gettysburg chillingly reminds me of the price of giving into the seduction of anger and the invigorating joy of conflict.

Our collect, our opening prayer today echoed in my head:

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

We prayed this morning that God's grace will go before us and walk ahead of us, for God's grace to enfold us, envelop us. God's grace, God's forgiveness and mercy that we do not earn, that we can not earn, that is given to each of us, southern and northerner, pro-vaccine, anti-vaccine, Biden fan, Trump fan.

We prayed today for God's grace, God's mercy we that all need as we fall short, we stumble and fail, as we give into the seduction of anger and fighting, and a house divides and a mother can never visit the grave of one of her sons.

Our travels this week went on and we drove north to visit our dear friend Glenda. We knew Glenda in DC, as she attended Tim's church in northeast Washington many years ago. After Glenda retired from teaching, she moved home to her family's farm in the tiny town of Troupsburg NY, to live with her widowed Mom, Gertrude.

Going back to NY brought Glenda back not only to Gertrude but to a community of folks, at least half of whom are related to her. Her parents were both part of large families and so cousins abound in the countryside surrounding Glenda's farm.

Gertrude died a few years ago at 96 years old, a small, sturdy practical woman with a sparkling sense of humor. This visit, Glenda and Tim and I went to the cemetery to visit her parents' graves. The church cemetery is on quite a steep hill, with a breathtaking view of the church to our left, and a farm house and fields and winding road below. As the three of us wandered in the old church cemetery, we could hear on the wind the whinnying of horses from the valley, and we could look out on the hills covered in the autumn splendor of reds and yellows.

As we found different graves Glenda told us family and community stories, including the woman that made Glenda recall the regular gatherings for potluck suppers in the church when she was a small child. She could distinctly remember how her father and cousin would, for each supper, take on the job of unofficial greeters, warmly welcoming folks at the door, and also watching who brought what dish, so as to be able to warn family members as to which dish Mrs. Smith brought, always tasteless and often nausea inducing!

Tim found graves with the name Van Duyn, his stepfather's family name, and we took pics of this surprise find so far from Michigan where they had settled, to send to step-siblings and cousins.

One grave caught my eye, and we all did as we did for so many of the graves, we rubbed off the dried grass and dirt and peered at the old worn lettering.

This grave slowly told its story on that peaceful hill side, the sun and shadows covering us as the clouds moved overhead.

"James S. Everett Jr, member of the regiment of NY died in the division hospital near

Petersburg VA 1864, 17 years old.”

As we engage in our own arguments in 2021, as brother fights with brother in this modern era, may we as Christians remember our higher and so challenging call to daily remember how ALL of us need so deeply God’s grace, God’s love and mercy as each of us falls short. And that ONLY with God’s grace ahead of us and behind us in every moment, can we possibly try to let go of the invigoration of hate, and

“.....continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.”