

“Nothing -- Nil, Null, Zero, Nix, Zilch, Nada, Zippo, Bupkis,

Goose Egg, Naught, Nuttin’...”

July 30, 2017 – 17th of Ordinary

Genesis 28:10-19

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that 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 what I have promised you.” Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel;

Romans 8:26-39

8:26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 8:27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. 8:28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 8:29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. 8:30 And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. 8:31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 8:32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? 8:33 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 8:34 Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. 8:35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 8:36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." 8:37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 8:38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 8:39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³²it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." ³³He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

13:44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 13:45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 13:46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. 13:47 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 13:48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 13:49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 13:50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be

weeping and gnashing of teeth. 13:51 "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." 13:52 And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

The premise for today's sermon is all about nothing. Which doesn't mean nothing, but nothing. Nothing is an interesting concept and one about which there has been much debate concerning the nature of nothing. As per the title of today's sermon we have a lot of words about nothing -- **Nothing -- Nil, Null, Zero, Nix, Zilch, Nada, Zippo, Bupkis, Goose Egg, Naught, Nuttin'...**" all of which describe 'nothing.' Nothing can be thought of as a lack of something or anything for that matter, but as a topic about nothing it seems to have more than nothing to say. It is, of course, very theological as well, as an early scriptural assertion is that God created the world from nothing. Of course the great theologians of the world who are accustomed to speaking about nothing have a lot to say about nothing when it comes to describing God's ability to create all from nothing. Of course 'nothing' isn't an important enough word so they describe creation from nothing as 'ex nihilo.'

Now the latin phrase, "Creatio Ex Nihilo" or as we say in English, "creation out of nothing." is a heavy, metaphysically dense topic, so perhaps a joke is in order:

Some scientists wanted to show church people that they no longer needed any supernatural component to explain things in the world. So they got an audience with the pope and all of the world's religious leaders to demonstrate that they could form a human being out of dirt just like God supposedly did. The religious leaders were interested enough to see their demonstration, so the scientists set

up the contraption that would sort out the chemical elements from the dirt and recombine them into a human being. Just as they were scooping up some dirt to put into the hopper, a booming voice from the sky said, "Hold on a minute... get your own dirt." Which of course reminds us that God is all about *nothing* and *everything* and that God may have been the writer, and was certainly the inspiration of some of the most important and famous words of all time concerning nothing from, Billy Preston, "Nothin' from nothin' leaves nothin', You gotta have somethin' if you want to be with me, Nothin' from nothin' leaves nothin', You gotta have somethin' if you want to be with me."

Which, if that is the case means that out of nothing, God's intention is that we have something which can only come from God. Something that God desires so much that God will allow nothing to get in the way.

From the beginning God has been creating something from nothing so that we can find ourselves in relationship with God. This summer we've been reading the stories of God creating, out of nothing, the beginnings of that relationship with us. With people. With a people, who before God calls them into being were – no people. Nothing. But out of nothing God calls Abraham and begins a process of creating relationship by promising this one and his spouse who were of great age and had no, nil, not one, child, that they would be the progenitor of a great people all by the creation of a blessing, from nothing, that would become the most important something of all time.

In these stories we see that God will allow nothing to interfere. Not barrenness nor trickery nor doubt nor deceit nor dysfunction nor fear nor nothing. Today we read about Jacob, the son of Isaac, who is the offspring of the 90 year olds, off to find a wife when he gets a refresher course in God's plan to create something from nothing. In his dream he sees and hears God's promise come alive, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that 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 what I have promised you." That's not nothing, that's a whole lot of something. A huge amount of effort just to get something done that God could, it would seem, just do. **But** you don't get something for nothing -- right? Unless you are God.

In Matthew today Jesus uses the almost nothing to show how important nothing is. A mustard seed and a bit of leaven. Almost nothing, but a mustard seed becomes grows from that nothing into the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches a Which is of course, not nothing at all. And that bit of yeast, which are single-celled microorganisms can make all that flour come alive. From nothing come

great gifts like a treasure in a field or a pearl of great price which point to the kingdom of God which is what God has been moving us toward since Abraham.

Which finally brings us back to “nothing.” Which is what Paul is speaking of today. For us, nothing is difficult to grasp, because we are ‘anything’ or at least ‘something’ people. Anything thing you want, anything you need. Anything to get the job done. But, Anything we could do, want to do, desire to do, can do to give up our all for something... doesn’t get us what only God can give us.

But then, Nothing can. Nothing we can say, do, think of, connive for, offer up, trade for, certainly not work for, or be good enough for, or purchase, or even somehow inexplicably imagine that we deserve, can get for us what only God can give us. God’s kingdom, salvation, liberation from our sins, liberation from ourselves, faith, life eternal. Nothing we can do, earn, or save up for can secure for us that which is known as GRACE.... It only comes from God to us... because God loves us enough to give up even God’s own son, treasure unparalleled, of infinite priceless-less-ness, – because God loves us that much.

“What,” Paul asks, are we to say about these things... and the answer in a word.... Is nothing. Listen we who don’t know how to pray, listen we who are predestined, thank God, listen we who are justified and glorified – how? By God’s love. God’s love alone. Listen – who is in a position to condemn? Not who is worthy of condemnation? We all are. But who is in a position to condemn? Only one. If God has done all of this for us – to claim us, to redeem us, to make us

once again God's own...who could be against us? Only one. Who is out there to say you are guilty and you deserve all you get? Who is out there to say you are a lowly sorry example of humanity and you aren't worthy? Who is out there to say 'you are a weed' bundle them up for the fire? Who is going to go through that net full of fish and pick the ones to be thrown out? Who? Only one.

Who is to condemn? And this is the delicious, delectable, delightful part – It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Our prosecutor is our defense attorney. Our counselor on this team of Grace is our advocate the Holy Spirit and sitting on the bench our judge is almighty God who devised the very plan for our reconciliation, our salvation and our underserved acquittal in the life, death and resurrection of the son. out of nothingness. Ex nihilo.

What then can separate us from that powerful, stupendous, grace filled, eternal love? Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

(Pause) Even when it seems like everything separates us. Nothing can. Even when the world is polarized, God allows nothing to separate us. Paul says, reflecting his day: Not hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, which means not illness, not the economy, not the madness of war, not our health or healthcare or lack thereof, not poverty, not our deepest grief, not our despair, not

our hard heartedness or hard headedness when we're terrified someone, even a child or a refugee, might come and take from us what we've got, not even our doubt -- not anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. Nothing -- Now that's something we can hold on to.