

Sermon Proper 20 Year A September 18, 2011

Exodus 16:2-15

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

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The tendency to look back not just with nostalgia but with a sense that times were surely better than today is a longstanding one,. This was certainly true of the Israelites who last week were dreaming of the leeks and onions they enjoyed in Egypt and this morning are remembering the fleshpots and eating their fill of bread. They seem to have lost all memory of the hardships they experienced. They were slaves who worked hard and their masters were harsh taskmasters as Pharaoh had directed. All the unpleasantness though has been forgotten though as the Israelites long for the good old days.

That is a challenge for St. John's as well as we have celebrated over the past ten months our first century of life. One hundred years and we have done quite a bit of remembering. Yet, we have resisted the tendency to look back with glasses with too much filtering, too much rose coloring. We have looked back in gratitude for the hard work of all those both lay and ordained that have brought us to this festive point in our church's history.

Our God is one who makes provision for the people of God, whatever their circumstances or setting. The story from Exodus provides an example. The Israelites were traveling in the harsh environment of the wilderness. They were complaining against Moses and Aaron, but God understood their complaints differently. Moses and Aaron were God's spokespersons. The complaints were really directed against God. Yet, over and over rather than acting upon the anger such complaining generated, God showed his merciful care and responded to them in their time of need. Manna from heaven, doves rained from the sky, water from the rock, whatever was needed, God in his mercy provided. Yet, it did not produce lasting change in the Israelites' faith or behavior. They complained for forty years until a new generation entered the promise land.

But complaining is not just a characteristic of the Israelites. No, complaining is a characteristic of people throughout time.

Share our gospel lesson of the parable of the landowner and the workers with most of us, especially children, and we will be quick to point out that it “simply is not fair.” The story is straightforward. Straightforward that is until it comes to paying the wages at the end of the day. Then things get complicated. Those who were hired close to the end of the day were paid first and a full day’s wage at that. This led those who had worked longer to hope that they might be paid more even though they had agreed to the usual daily wage. When that did not happen they were dismayed. It simply was not fair in their eyes.

In our world we too tend to reduce much of ethical discourse to the question of fairness. This may simplify our discussions perhaps. We certainly hear politicians resort to arguments of fairness as an ethical ideal. And I am not suggesting that being fair is not a good, but it may not be the highest good. Fairness may be too low a bar in some instances.

Life is not fair. From the beginning we must come to grips with the accident of birth. We did not choose our families of origin or the communities we were born into. The school districts we grew up in, etc. All of this was beyond our control or influence. It was an accident of birth. We had an experience of seeing a different community of birth for the children of San Mateo, Belize on our mission trip last month. To be born into such poverty is not of one’s design, it just happens. Children born in our community and those born in San Mateo have vastly different world views and social environments. Life is simply not fair.

And not just from birth but it continues from there as we develop, go to school, begin to work, suffer accidents, disasters, and illness. Much to the horror of medical professionals not all illnesses are the result of poor choices. Bad things happen to good people. Life is simply not fair.

A culture whose only value is fairness has trouble seeing other values, such as the value of mercy. Mercy is a value that God demonstrates time and again.

Recently I spoke with a young man who was unemployed. He has an associate’s degree but he is unable to find work. He found himself driving 30 miles early each morning to the closest location where day laborers are hired. He must leave early to arrive by 6 a.m. to have the greatest opportunity to be chosen. If one is not selected by 10 am there is little

chance that you will find work for the day. In that situation he has burned \$15 worth of gas, but has no chance of work for the day. Day laborers in his area make about \$50-60 for 8 hours of work; it is not a lot; but it is the going rate. It doesn't take too many days of not finding work at the day labor rate to really discourage a person.

In our gospel parable, the landowner goes out each day to the day labor gathering place. Upon finding available workers he invites them to work as well. This is a gracious and generous landowner or one who is under great pressure to complete the harvest in a very timely manner. Regardless people are hired throughout the day. This landowner seems to be aware of the vulnerability of this category of worker. "Why are you standing idle all day?" "You also go into the vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right." Apparently whatever is right is what it takes to live, a daily wage.

Our God is one who makes provision for the people of God.

We too are a little like the laborers in the vineyard in our own way. People have been laboring here at St. John's for one hundred years. Some families have been here from the beginning. Some of us have just arrived.

We have been welcomed into the vineyard that is St. John's Church. God has brought us here. And God has done that with something in mind. What I think characterizes St. John's at this exciting juncture in its history is the way in which laborers who have been called over an extended period of time are open to one another receptive to one another. That is not always the case in churches. But it is true here. Committee memberships and leaders rotate with significant frequency. When newcomers arrive we realize that God has brought them here. Yes, we offer them opportunities to join in our present mission and ministries. But we are also open to listening to them, to hear the message that God may be bringing to us through them. Innumerable ministries have been begun here by faithful disciples in touch with God's call in their lives. Our mission is "Sharing Christ's love." We actively participate in the reign of God as we live into our mission statement. We share Christ's love with one another, with our community, with the country beyond, and the world. I don't hear

a lot of “we can’t possibly do that.” Instead, I hear people saying, “How can we make this happen?”

We are like day laborers, invited by God and then welcomed by the others already in the vineyard. God is gathering workers for the harvest. God has been gathering a community of disciples at St. John’s for a century. These disciples have had a variety of leaders. We have been led by people of great faith from bishops, to faithful laypeople, to faithful priests and deacons. God is always sending leaders into the harvest and scripture tells us that God is forming a people for his own. What an inheritance is ours, thanks to all those faithful people who have labored in the vineyard of St. John’s in the generations before us.

We face challenges ahead. We need only to look around to see them. There is work we have to do if we are to convert the things that are passing away into things that shall endure to quote our collect for this morning.

Yet, we need only to look to Paul’s letter to the Philippians for encouragement. Paul says, “Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” He goes on to say, “I know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.” I hope that is how God sees this community. A community that God has been building for over a hundred years. A community that continues to listen actively to where God may be calling us.

You see, our God is not merely fair. God is much better than that. We worship God whose property is always to have mercy. A God who is slow to anger and full of compassion. There is a contemporary Christian song with the title of “Awesome God.” Last Sunday we sang that song at the beginning of Children’s Chapel during the 10:30 a.m. service. The songs lyrics say, “With wisdom, power, and love our God is an awesome God.” Awesome indeed and just as awesome are the workers that God has called and continues to call into the vineyard that is St. John’s Church.