

Sermon for 16th Sunday after Pentecost

Lectionary Readings: Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 1-5:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30;
Matthew 20:1-16

Our readings for this morning depict human nature in all its frailty, in our struggling to distinguish ourselves on the backs of others, and our failure to live with gratitude for things that are gifts that we have come to consider as rights. They show us that growth in the life of faith is hard work. They show us that choices are often difficult to make as we seek to live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. They also show us the at times startling and inconvenient nature of God's grace that overturns our expectations again and again in the continuing process of God's redemption.

You remember the attempts of Moses to have Pharaoh release the Hebrews and all the plagues that descended upon Egypt before he would relent. But we read that, in the end, "Egypt was glad of their going, because they were afraid of them." And we find these very people having been freed from slavery and back-breaking labor in Egypt now grumbling about the food in the wilderness that is there for their gathering as a free gift from the God who has freed them and accompanied them on their journey.

We find how difficult it is to trust in God when God offers us new life. Yes, the Hebrew people have been led out of slavery by Moses towards life in the Promised Land, but the Promised Land is so far just that – promise but not yet reality. The transition time, the time of wandering in the wilderness towards this promise, requires giving up the familiar to live in a way they have never known. Growth is hard; growing pains are real. So they fight it, kicking and screaming, as it were, and constantly complaining rather than embracing the change God is offering them that leads to their new life, to their salvation. Just as we see so often in families with legacies of abuse, they'd rather go with the old abuse than embrace the new in all its mystery and challenge. In their state of muttering and complaining, they close themselves off to the presence of God in their very midst.

And yet our readings show that God listens and responds even to complainers, show us that God's generosity is always greater than ours. They show us that God's response often works outside our comfort zone. The bread that rains down from heaven in the morning and the meat that is given to the Hebrews in the form of quails – enough for all to be filled but not possible to be hoarded – is new to them. They question rather than embrace it; they close themselves off to the glory of God that is with them.

How often do we resist change, resist the new life that God is offering us, hold on to the familiar rather than embrace the miracle?

If at times we tend to sentimentalize grace and make it overly sweet, our gospel for today brings a sharp corrective. Here we find that grace is not fair, but rather radical and offensive. The laborers out in the sun all day witness the newcomers getting more than their fair share—a full day's wages for a fraction of a day--being made equal to them by the landowner. They start their muttering against the owner of the vineyard as they are disappointed in not receiving the extra wages they feel they now deserve for the longer hours they have worked. Haven't they been working all day in the sun, unlike these lazy newcomers? They resent the newcomers. Have we not heard the muttering about the benefits accruing to new immigrants, especially illegal aliens, what we feel they don't deserve in the same way we do who have been here so long and somehow earned them. Moreover, we are afraid of these people and their numbers, with a birth rate so much higher than the "legitimate" population. We fear them; we build walls to keep them out.

Yet our economy depends on these newcomers, these people different from ourselves. We depend on them for labor we feel is beneath us; we are bound together in spite of ourselves. As I read our gospel, I was reminded of the clusters of men who used to gather at the train station in a previous town where I worked – in that community they were primarily Paraguayan, but there are parallels all over in cities and towns across our country, people gathering in hopes of being chosen for day work in many of our towns. They are often taken advantage of; yet they have scant recourse if they are abused.

Yes, those who have labored longest in the gospel have worked hard under the hot sun. But possibly they are always the ones to be picked first; the ones with healthier bodies or more attractive familiar faces; the ones who don't have to fear that they and their families will have to endure yet another day without any pay at all and the anguish and humiliation they feel in being unable to provide for their families. The ones chosen last because they don't meet an ideal norm may know that they are both despised and feared for their difference—a distance that many of us have an interest in maintaining. Our psalm conveys the fear on the part of the Egyptians about the growing numbers of Hebrew people, the aliens among them who provided their slave labor force to build their monuments.

Is God's grace about fairness or about God's good pleasure? Is it about mercy when we need it ourselves and justice when we want to be certain that others haven't received more than our share? When we think about all the privileges, the comforts, the security of living in the country we do, discounting the native peoples who were here long before us, "colonized and deposed of their territories as distinct peoples—hundreds of nations,"ⁱ would we really want God's grace to be about fairness? Can we live with the idea of God's grace being at times a corrective to our blindness and lack of sympathy to others? Can it be an unfolding, and at times a challenging mystery? And can we live with gratitude for so many blessings given to us by God—blessings that may initially be hard to recognize as such, things and times and people that are strange and unfamiliar, but which, nevertheless, nourish us. The answer, I believe, is "Yes."

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ⁱ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), p. xiii.