

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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Proper 20A 2008

In the name of our One ever creating, ever, loving, ever sustaining God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

You know, every so often the lectionary pitches us a good one. The readings for this Sunday literally scream out to us in these times of great economic, social and political anxiety. Is the glass half empty or half full? Are things getting better or worse? The answers to those questions depend in part on our own natural predispositions and what has been happening lately in our lives. That is a pretty narrow window. Fortunately the Bible gives us a wider range of vision.

The complaints of the Israelites in the wilderness of the Sinai desert against Moses and Aaron let me know that I am in good company when I start to feel sorry for myself and rail against the world. Here they have already forgotten about the Passover and being delivered from slavery. They have forgotten God's mercy in delivering them by parting the Red Sea and destroying the Egyptians. Here they are - alone in a strange place, uncertain of where they are going and what the future will hold - and they go that favorite of all human places: Nostalgia land - where everything was better than the present. The terror and misery of injustice and oppression is easily replaced by the memories of rice and onions cooking over the fire when faith is lost and hope abandoned. They have squeezed God out of the picture and the story becomes all about them.

However, God hears their complaints and again responds, sending them manna to gather and eat in the morning and quail to eat in the evening. But God gives them a challenge. He tells Moses to instruct them only to gather each morning only enough manna and in the evening only enough quail to feed the family for that day, except for the sixth day when they may gather enough for that day and for the Sabbath day following. Can they trust the Lord each day or should they trust themselves instead. That is God's challenge to all humanity. Jesus reminds us of this challenge in his prayer to the Father: "Give us THIS day our DAILY bread."

In our gospel lesson, Jesus picks up on this human tendency to see the world through human eyes only and to forget God has a role here and might view things differently. It is a parable that may be familiar to many of us. A vineyard owner goes out to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now that is bible talk big time! Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures – especially in the prophets – Israel is depicted as God's vineyard and God is the vineyard owner. All of these passages are about who really owns the vineyard and the relationship between the vineyard owner and the workers or the tenants. But here Jesus tells a parable that brings all of us into it.

The owner goes out in the morning to hire day laborers and they agree on a wage of a denarius – a Roman silver coin that represented a day's wages – enough to feed the family for the day with some left over to cover other expenses. We don't know why the owner needed workers so urgently – maybe it was the harvest – but he goes out again four more times during the day (indeed up until the eleventh hour) to hire yet more workers. Each time, he promises only to pay them "whatever is right". At the end of the day, he sends his manager to pay them. And here the telling of the

parable gets really interesting. He tells the manager to pay them beginning with the last hired at 5 in the afternoon and then going to those first hired early in the morning.

I don't know about you, but I find that when money starts getting passed out my interest and that of most people really picks up. So here we are all together- you, me, Jesus' listeners and the owner's hired hands - all hanging around watching the money. Those that only worked an hour in the cool late afternoon get paid a denarius. WOW! That's interesting. What do you think the ones who were hired first were thinking? Do you think they were getting a little pumped up anticipating what was going to be dropped into their hands? When they, too, get a denarius, they grumble and complain against the landowner: It isn't fair! What do you think? Well, I have been in that situation and I know what I thought!! In fact, I raised hell about it! In fact, I raised so much hell I got the money! For most of us the pay handed out to the workers isn't fair; it isn't proportional to the work.

So what is going on here? How can this be like the Kingdom of God? Where's the justice? First this parable totally undermines our human notion of justice that equates wages with worth. It undermines all our notions of human hierarchy beginning with the simplest that the one who does the same work longer and harder should get paid more money. God's ways, Jesus demonstrates, are not our ways. Our human ways of justice would have resulted in those later hired workers going home with less than enough to feed their families. Our sense of justice blinds us to pain of a father in that situation and the hunger of an uncomprehending child and the despair of a mother. We see justice but God sees us.

A lot of commentaries on this parable talk about how generous God was to have paid the later workers more. I don't think God was so very generous here – no one

got a bonanza out of this deal. No, I think God was being compassionate – everyone who accepted God’s call to work got a living wage for the day. The Kingdom of God comes near when our sense of justice is tempered by God’s sense of compassion.

We enter the kingdom of God not by reason of our worth or our money but simply by the grace of God’s invitation – and there is no hierarchy in the vineyard that makes one laborer more worthy in the eyes of the owner than any other. Unfair? To us perhaps, but in the end, each got all they needed for them and their families to survive.

This parable and God’s instructions to the Israelites had special relevance for me this week. Our financial markets have been shaken to their very foundations and great banking houses have fallen. The government has used hundreds of billions of dollars in credit to prop up some companies – credit that we and our children and our grandchildren are on the hook for. All this is on top of the already enormous federal deficits we have. We have waged a war fought largely by the poorest of our youth and at the same time gave tax cuts to the richest among us.

I am going to keep these bible readings in mind in the coming months and years as this plays out and keep in mind their truth that God’s sense of justice trumps any ethical spin that is and will come out of Wall Street, Washington and the talking heads on TV. As a result of this crisis, real children will go to bed hungry and real families of hard working people will become homeless. I will listen to the explanations but here are some I won’t buy: It is not God’s will! It is not simply “the markets” correcting themselves! And it did not “just happen”!

As I hope we still teach our children, things happen because real people make real decisions and take real actions based on their values. That is what needs to be

examined and I urge you to think of our Gospel lessons when you do your own examining. This past week has reminded me of the basic fact that it is all about trust. Where do we put our trust? Where do we put God in our lives and in our society and what values do we really trust?

Do you remember the uproar about five years ago when some professor sued to have “In God We Trust” take off the backs of our paper money? Remember all the talking heads and all the preachers spouting off? I wasn’t upset one way or another. Not because I don’t believe in God. Not because I don’t trust in God. No, I wasn’t upset because I thought it was all a big distraction. Frankly, I don’t think God cares one way or another what we print on our paper money! The Bible make perfectly clear that it is what we imprint on our hearts - our decision making muscle – that matters. What really do we trust?

Amen