

Sunday, September 27, 2020
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 21 (Year A)

Exodus 17.1-7; Philippians 2.1-13; Matthew 21.23-32

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Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/2608917099418271>

(Sermon begins at about 14:15)

“It’s Not About Us (Individually); It’s About Us (Collectively)”

These days it seems like, no matter where you turn, you are going to find people pitted against each other. Each person, each group wanting things their way. We even see this in Scripture.

In our Old Testament reading, we hear part of a larger drama involving the Israelites. Finally free from the tyranny of their Egyptian overlords, they complain against Moses and even against God himself. Why? Because things are not going the way they would like. Things are not going the way they expect. They want to be to their final destination. They want the comforts they once had in Egypt. They want to have food. They want to have water. And they want it all now. They don’t recognize that there is a process. They don’t recognize that what is going on is ultimately for the greater good of the entire community. Being so wrapped up in their own wants and desires, perhaps they don’t want to recognize that it is not about them individually, but about what is best for them collectively.

We see some of the same dynamics, only more pronounced, in our Gospel reading. This tension between the wants and desires of the individual or group of individuals versus the “greater good.” In this scene, it comes down to authority. The priests and elders of the temple are challenging Jesus’ authority. Where does he get off teaching in the temple and doing things like healing people and casting out demons? Seeing parallels between their reception of him and how they treated John the Baptist, Jesus challenges them by asking the source of John’s authority, knowing full well they don’t have the guts to provide an honest assessment. After all, they did not believe John the Baptist. Even though they had a thorough knowledge of the Law and were trained to think theologically. Of all people, they should have been able to see that, yep, what John the Baptist was saying was spot on. Yet, they did not heed his warning. From their perspective, it was not in their best interests. They could do better for themselves by hiding behind their positions of authority, doing whatever they wanted for their own benefit, while dictating to the common folk what they needed to do to conform to God’s laws. And the fact that their interpretation of the Law benefited the temple authorities? So much the better. When challenged on this by Jesus, they are, naturally, reluctant to answer, for fear of the truth being revealed. For fear of exposing themselves to criticism by the populace.

Seeing right through the temple authorities’ line of thinking, their modus operandi, Jesus tells a parable to expose their hypocrisy without directly accusing them—the parable of the two sons. A man asks his two sons to do some work in the family vineyard. The first son responds, “Not gonna happen,” but ends up doing what his father asks anyway. The second son responds, “Sure, no problem,” and then flakes out and doesn’t follow through. Both sons say one thing and do the opposite. We don’t know why. As to the first son, at least he was honest about his

original intentions of not wanting to do any work—you gotta give him that. Unlike his brother, who said he was going to work and didn't. Maybe the second son had no intention of doing any work to begin with, in which case he was not at all honest about his intentions. Maybe he told his father that he would work, even though not intending to, so he would look good in the eyes of his father. How he thought that would end well is anybody's guess.

Even in Jesus time, the adage of "actions speak louder than words" applied—whether it was a saying or not. Actions, not empty words, are what is important. In answering Jesus' question "Which of the two did the will of his father?" the religious authorities unwittingly condemn themselves. In recognizing that even though the first son did what his father asked regardless of his attitude leading up to it, they were thereby condemning the second son who did not do what the father asked even though he had committed to do so. They did not even realize that they were more akin to the second son than the first. They knew the Law. They knew what they were supposed to do to follow God's Law. By virtue of their positions, they were dutybound to follow God's Law. Yet, they were not. They were just like the second son. So, in lifting up the first son as being the righteous one and condemning the second for not being righteous, they were actually highlighting the fact that they themselves are unrighteous. And, in answering the way they did, they missed an opportunity to repent. To change their own perspective, their own actions. To turn back to what they were sworn to do as servants of God.

Given this, it is clear that the parable Jesus presents is crafted with the temple authorities in mind and is clearly directed toward them as an indictment against their actions or lack thereof. But, of course, Jesus' parables are nearly always applicable to a broader segment of the population than the originally intended audience. And today's parable is no exception. This is about more than just the abuses of authority by the temple officials. This is a statement about general tendencies of all humanity. In the parable, both of the sons, regardless of their intentions, regardless of their responses to their father, reflect our tendencies to be concerned with our own desire, with what we want. Sometimes, without regard for what is best for the common good. Don't get me wrong. Or rather, don't get Jesus wrong. He isn't saying that we are always like the sons. We are not always like the temple authorities. But there is that tendency to look out for number one. There is that tendency to develop our own ideas and then to tenaciously hold on to them. Even when our desires, our ideas, our actions, are not in keeping with what the Father—with what God—desires.

Our Epistle reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians addresses this reality. In the passage we heard this morning, Paul is addressing the general subject of unity in faith, as he writes, "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit" (Phil 2.2-3). As if that is not clear enough, Paul puts a period on it when he then writes, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Phil 2.4). This is what it means to be Christians. As those who follow Jesus Christ. That we seek first to care for the interests of others before our own interests. That we seek what is in the interest of the broader community over our individual interests. In this, we are to have unity of mind, unity of purpose. That is what we buy into when we agree to follow Christ.

Paul then lifts up Christ himself as the ultimate example of that: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with

God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2.5-8). The key point in this beautifully poetic passage being that Jesus willingly “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” How “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2.7-8). Images of self-giving, images of service to others. Even to the point of going to the cross. Not that he wanted to do that. But that was what was required for him humbly and obediently to accomplish what he came here to do. His own desires did not matter. What mattered was his willingness to be humble and obedient to God’s desires.

God does not desire us to go to the extremes that Jesus was called to. But God has desires for us, nonetheless. Desires to follow his commandments faithfully and unceasingly. To love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. That we are to love God and love our neighbors above and beyond our love of self.

As we look at the nightmare that is the year 2020, perhaps we see more of a need for this selfless living into the commandments to love God and to love other than ever. Particularly the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. With each passing day, it becomes more and more apparent that this is what is needed. A return to basics. To filter all our actions, individually and collectively, through those commandments. Through that one commandment to love others—to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Take the pandemic. Particularly the recommendations to wear masks. Some object that it is not necessary. Even that such directives are politically motivated. Even that such directives are a violation of individual rights. Well, its not about us individually. Its about us collectively. And the science shows that masks are the best way to prevent the spread of COVID-19. That’s how we love our neighbors as ourselves.

Take the protests regarding racial justice and the opposition to systemic racism. A system that benefits some of us at the expense and to the detriment of others. Well, its not about us as individuals or as individual groups. Its about us collectively. Its about recognizing that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. That we are all sisters and brothers. That we respect the dignity of every human being (which, by the way, is part of our baptismal vows). That we are all equal and must be treated equally. That’s how we love our neighbors as ourselves.

And then there’s the myriad of political wrangling and strife that has beset our nation—which has become more pronounced in recent years. The focus on, the obsession with, partisan ideologies and partisan politics. Not on bipartisanship and reaching across the aisle, but rather with on a single-minded goal of getting what we can for our party while thwarting the other party. It’s the same question Jesus and the temple officials were arguing about. Power. Well, it’s not about us individually or individual political parties. It’s about us collectively. Its about finding ways to work together to build up our collective society rather than to tear down individual segments of it. That’s how we love our neighbors as ourselves.

Presumably, we are all aware that we are only five weeks from the general elections. Voting is one way that we have of seeking to love our neighbors as ourselves. Of seeking to make

changes that reflect our commitment to the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. The question is, how do we vote in a way that reflects not our partisan political ideologies, but in a way that reflects the Gospel commandments to love God and love neighbor? Our Presiding Bishop recently preached a sermon dealing with our Christian responsibility to vote. If you have not heard it, I posted it on the parish Facebook page last week, and commend it to you. In that sermon, Bishop Curry says the question we need to ask is not the old question of “what would Jesus do?” Instead, we need to look at the Gospels, at how Jesus lived his life, at what Jesus did in his ministry, who Jesus hung out with, what Jesus actually said, and ask “what did Jesus do?” And then to do likewise. To do likewise in our daily lives, as well as in the voting booth.

As people of faith, as those who follow Christ, we have a sacred duty: to follow God’s commandments. And as American citizens, we likewise have a sacred duty, one of them being to exercise our right to vote. Those sacred duties are not mutually exclusive. They overlap in profound ways. Here in California, all of us (assuming we’re registered) will soon be receiving our ballots in the mail. Regardless of your political affiliation, I urge you to exercise your sacred duty as a citizen and as a Christian. To prayerfully discern how your choices at the ballot box reflect your commitment to follow Christ. To discern how your choices at the ballot box reflect your commitment to love your neighbor as yourself. This is vitally important, because in the words of the Apostle Paul, “it is God who is at work in [us], enabling [us] both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2.13).

It’s not about us individually. It’s about us collectively. It’s time we start acting like it.