

Sunday, October 1, 2017
17th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 21 (Year A)
Exodus 17.1-7; Philippians 2.1-13; Matthew 21.23-32
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

This being the first Sunday in October, that can only mean one thing. It's time to begin our annual parish stewardship campaign. By now you should have all received, and hopefully read and pondered, my stewardship letter, in which I introduced the theme for this year's campaign: "Journey to Generosity." In which I shared some of my own experience of what this ongoing journey has been like for me. And hopefully, which prompted you to begin to think about your own Journey to Generosity.

Today's Scripture readings each provide a key piece of the picture that ultimately leads us to a fuller understanding and appreciation of what this Journey to Generosity is about. An understanding that is based not just on the usual expressions of why we do our annual pledge campaign – that we need money to pay our staff, to maintain our facilities, to provide for our parish programs, to fund our various ministries in our community. Yes, these are all important. They are all true. Our readings for today provide a scriptural – even a spiritual – justification for why we will spend the next seven weeks focusing on stewardship in general, and pledging in particular. Each of our readings contain threads that when woven together reveal a beautiful tapestry of why we truly commit to giving financially to this parish.

We will take each reading individually, chronologically as to when they were written, and then weave them together in light of our stewardship theme of Journey to Generosity.

Our Old Testament reading from Exodus depicts a particular scene early in the Israelites' journey out of Egypt, into the wilderness. A journey that in 40 years will lead them to the Promised Land. The people begin to grumble because water is scarce in this wilderness. They cry out to Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" (Ex 17.3b). While grumbling to Moses, the people are really questioning God's faithfulness. What they fail to see is that God has been faithful to them. God has lead them on a journey to new life that was not possible in Egypt, where they were slaves. God has provided manna from heaven to feed them. And now, they are in need of water. Hearing their cries, God does, once again, provide for their needs. He commands Moses to strike a rock at Horeb, out of which flows life-giving water. Water necessary for physical life. A sign that God is the source of life.

In this action, God provides for the needs of his people. God is generous and provides in abundance. And most importantly, this generosity comes with no strings attached. Despite their doubt about God and their own unfaithfulness toward God, God continued to supply their needs.

Our Gospel reading from Matthew depicts an awkward exchange between Jesus and the temple authorities. In response, Jesus tells a parable about a father who asks his two sons to go work in the vineyard. One says "no," but eventually changes his mind and does go. The second

says “yes,” but then does not go. Jesus is raising the question of obedience. Which son does the will of his father? The first, of course. The holy response to God’s authority is action prompted by God’s will – just as the father willed the son to do his bidding. The first son initially refused, but it was ultimately the fact that the father asked, because of the relationship between the father and the son, that the son did finally come through. Jesus is raising the question of what it mean to obey God (who is represented by the father). And in so doing, Jesus is really condemning the often hypocritical words and actions of the temple authorities. Those who claim to do God’s will but actually don’t. Just like the second son. This is not what leads to salvation. This is not what leads to participation in the kingdom of God.

In a real slap to the authorities, Jesus says “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Mt 21.31c). Tax collectors and prostitutes – those who are looked down upon, condemned, by society, by “proper, devout people” – are the true beneficiaries of God’s generosity. Tax collectors and prostitutes – people who by all outward appearances have not even claimed to say “yes” to God but who have nevertheless responded to or found their place within God’s kingdom, thanks to God’s generosity. What ultimately matters is what we DO in response to God’s call. Saying that we will do God’s will, but not acting on it, is a barrier to true and authentic response to God.

God invites us into the work of the vineyard. Working in the vineyard is about playing one’s part in God’s ongoing work. About contributing to the abundance represented by God’s vineyard – God’s kingdom. And being the recipients of God’s generosity.

Our Epistle reading from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians specifically addresses what we need to consider as we respond to God’s invitation to enter into the work of his generosity. That it is through our own generosity. Paul tells us, “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2.4-5). Paul is reminding us that as followers of Christ, we have committed to being obedient to Gods’ laws, just as Christ was obedient to God. Paul tells us, just as Christ was “obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2.8). Christ’s obedience and selflessness, culminating in his going to the cross, is to be the model for us and our living as his followers. So, too, we are to be obedient to the point of giving our own lives for the sake of the Gospel. For the sake of God’s kingdom. Particularly in our own time, most of us are not called to give up our physical lives. But as Christians, we are all called to give of our lives. To give of our selves. As Paul exhorts the Philippians, in humility they must treat the needs of others as more important than their own. Giving of themselves to support the needs of others.

We do not do this work alone. We not only have Christ as our model and guide. As Paul notes, “for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2.13). God is within us, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. God is our power and strength as we find the resolve and the means to give of ourselves for the sake of his kingdom. If we are obedient, if we are truly committed to the work of the vineyard, we find a way to say “yes” in both our words and our actions.

As we begin our Journey to Generosity, we look to Scripture to provide an understanding of what this journey is and why we make it.

We make this journey because, despite any doubts we may have about God and despite our own unfaithfulness toward God, God continues to generously supply our needs.

We make this journey because God invites us into the work of his vineyard. To participating in and contributing to the abundance represented by God's vineyard.

We make this journey in our commitment to living the Gospel by looking beyond our own interests to the interests of others.

We make this journey because we recognize that through our giving, we participate in God's generosity in two ways. First in the act of giving, we are following the model of God's generosity – giving as he gives. And second, it is the purpose of the church to be the collective Body of Christ in the world. In giving to the church community, the church uses the fruits of our generosity to fulfil that role, doing the ministry of the church, being God's hands and feet and heart in the world. To provide for God's generosity inside and beyond these walls.

May you be blessed in your own Journey to Generosity.