

Philadelphia -- Proper 17C

Our journeys through Luke's Gospel and the prophecies of Jeremiah continue to provide the frame of reference we must have if we are to be faithful people in community. The stories remind, exhort, chide, encourage, discomfit and reassure us by turns. It is because we continue to tell these stories that we are called "People of the Book." They make us ponder what it means to be in relationship with God and goodness: Eden, The Flood, The Exodus, and the heroic tales of Jesus telling truth to power. If we cease to tell, enact and live by our sacred stories, other narratives will rush in to displace them.

If each of these stories is a kind of play, then the psalms could be considered musicals – or little operas – they define us as "People of the Songbook" as well. Although the psalm we said together today was probably composed 3 or 4 hundred years earlier than Jeremiah lived, the themes of Psalm 81 and Jeremiah's prophecy are similar: We were in covenant with God. Now we are in violation of that contract. What's to be done about it? And how to convey the idea in song?

Psalm 81 is said to be an instruction to the musicians. There is a note in some texts: "Musicians, play this on the little harp." The song is organized as follows:

How to celebrate the covenant:

Ring out your joy to God our strength; shout in triumph to the God of Jacob. Raise a song, sound the timbrel, the sweet-sounding harp and the lute;

Remember why we celebrate:

Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast. New moon is Rosh-Hashanah – the 'Head of the Year,' the

first day of the Hebrew calendar, and the beginning of the season called the 'High Holy Days,' or 'Days of Awe.' It commemorates the very Creation.

"At the full moon, on our feast..." refers to the day, halfway through the month, when the moon has grown to full. Two weeks after Rosh-Hashanah, comes the feast of Tabernacles, known as Succos. The booth-like tabernacles recall the temporary nomad shelters in which the Israelites dwelt during the forty years of their wanderings after Egypt. "For this is a command God imposed on Joseph, when he went out against the land of Egypt."

So far, so good. Celebration -- a party goin' on round here. What's the occasion? Life itself! and Liberation from servitude. Two good ones. We might call them 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'

At this point, the psalmist takes a turn saying, "A voice I did not know said to me..." and the rest of the song is a first person peek inside the mind of God, whispering the truths that God knows will keep us well, if only we could embrace them. And what happens when we don't.

God broods, "You called in distress and I saved you. At the waters of Meribah I tested you. (Meribah is where the people were revolting -- in both senses of the word -- accusing God and Moses of letting them die of thirst and lusting after other deities. When Moses appealed to God, he was told to strike the rock of Horeb with his stick. When he did, life-giving water gushed out.

"O Israel, if only you would heed! Open wide your mouth and I will fill it. O that Israel would walk in my ways! At once I

would subdue all their foes, and turn my hand against their enemies. But Israel I will fill with honey from the rock” The metaphor of fresh life-giving water falls so sweetly on the mind that we liken it to honey. God, yearning to nourish humankind with the sweetest kind of love but continually put off by human fear.

By the time Jeremiah delivers his prophecy, the people of Israel have been conquered and many of them deported into servitude in Babylon. The conclusion they draw is that God turned away from them because, once again, they turned away from God first? They wandered and wasted away their awareness of and their allegiance to Yahweh, and this present disaster is the result. Well, nowadays, not too many of us can buy that logic. We know that war and disease and misfortune come to good people as well as to bad people. We cannot say to, or of a conquered people, “It’s because you didn’t pray rightly.” We have to treat these illustrations as metaphorical. But we can indeed continue to listen to Jeremiah on the subject of our convictions and purposes, and our inconsistent ability to embrace compassion, justice and accountability. Again using vivid water imagery, the prophet asks, “Which do you want as your source of supply, a leaky, unreliable cistern or a permanent, sparkling fountain of ‘living water?’”

This is the message Jesus brings as well: drink of this living water and you shall be free. For Luke, nothing is more serious than table talk. So when Jesus sits down at a meal and the conversation is recorded, we would do well to listen up. The heart of the matter is often revealed over dinner. As the Malawi proverb says ‘All will be known at the sharing of the meal.’ What does Jesus talk about? It’s the wisdom of the ages: Those who are arrogant will not go unpunished. Pride goes before

destruction. It is better to be at home among the poor than to divide spoils with the proud.

As usual, Jesus goes a step further, over-accepting the precepts of his religious traditions and transforming them into a mode of life that transcends religion: 'Do not just take a more lowly place yourself, but invite people to your table who have no hope of repaying you.' That's a true gift. All other gifts participate in a worldly economy. But the immeasurable benefit; the saving grace of God comes with participation in a spiritual economy instead. Demand less than you are due – all the rest will be gravy. Turn away from the pursuit of prestige. Make a commitment to love. Invite them out of love, not because it's a project of yours to buy merit.

On this subject of merit, the great Yiddish sage Sholom Aleichem reminds us of the tradition of inviting the Urumeleit, the poor and destitute to any feast. He tells about the time when there were two weddings on the same day in the devout city of Kiev and after the first wedding, the town's Urumeleit – the poor and homeless -- were so partied out after the first wedding, that the second family had to pay them to appear at theirs.

If it's true that all unhappiness reflects a separation from God, the way to be at peace is to celebrate and imitate the fundamental precepts God reveals. Be transformed by cultivating humility and giving precedence in your life to compassion, charity and healing over everything, including religious observance. Be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus in the world, even if it means diverging from tradition – and you will be entertaining angels. As someone once said, "Humility is like underwear: you should always wear it, but never let it show." The Greek word we have translated as

'hospitality' literally means 'love of stranger.' Not a project we can merely take on, but one we must embrace.

The word for 'mutual love' we find in New Testament Greek is *philadelphia*. This may remind one of the phenomenal William Claude Dukenfield, known to Mae West (and everybody else) as W. C. Fields, whose vaudeville and movie career consisted of one unloving, selfish and hilariously antisocial character after another. He was a native of Pennsylvania's 'City of Brotherly Love,' and is quoted as having said about a big contest: "First Prize: A week in Philadelphia. Second Prize: Two weeks in Philadelphia!"

Surely the irony of this saying was not lost on him: Too much city and too much mutual brotherly love are equally repulsive. In *My Little Chickadee*, as Fields' Cuthbert J. Twillie is about to be unfairly hanged for banditry, he declares, "I'd like to see Paris before I die...Philadelphia will do." In other words, Fields knows he's striking a nerve in declaring 'I much prefer to have the life "Sin City" promises, but if there's no other option, I'll settle for brotherly love.' 'I'd like to remain a teenage party boy forever, but if there's no other option, I guess I'll try to be good.

Jesus, of course declares that, in that city, the City of God, where the lamb is the light, there lies the true grand prize of our existence: "A lifetime of love, no matter where you are, that will be its own reward." Eventually, even W. C. Fields was at least partially convinced. Asked for his choice of epitaph, Fields grudgingly offered, "Here lies W. C. Fields. 'I'd rather be living in Philadelphia.'" It was a start for him. It's a good place for us to start too.