

The Sunday Missive – September 20, 2020



The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Greetings, one and all, and welcome to St. Peter's by the Sea. Nancy Castle, Thelma Knight Huchthausen, Diane and Roger Ludin and I bring you this service of prayer, scripture and song with love. If you go to our facebook page, you can watch and participate in this service from home:

[facebook.com/StPetersMorroBay](https://www.facebook.com/StPetersMorroBay) Scroll down until you see today's Sunday Missive, anytime after 1 P.M. on Sunday, September 20. No facebook account is needed! Please direct any questions or comments to your rector, The Rev. Sidney Symington via: (203) 209-2339 or: sssymington@gmail.com. **And so we begin:**

You are no longer strangers and sojourners, but fellow citizens with the saints and true members of the household of God. Grace to you and peace from The Lord our Creator, and The Christ our Redeemer who, through the power of the Holy Spirit live as one God, now and forever. Let us pray.

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

O Lord our only true Governor, bless the leaders of our land, that we may become a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to other nations of the earth. Teach our people to rely on your strength and to accept our responsibilities to our fellow human beings and our planet, that we may elect trustworthy leaders who will make wise decisions for the well-being of our world; that we may learn to serve you faithfully in our generation.

Amen.

Hymn 339 – Deck Thyself My Soul With Gladness

Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness, leave the gloomy haunts of sadness,
Come into the daylight's splendor; there with joy thy praises render
Unto him whose grace unbounded hath this wondrous banquet founded;
High o'er all the heavens he reigneth, yet to dwell with thee he deigneth.

Sun, who all my life dost brighten; light, Who dost my soul enlighten;
Joy the best that any knoweth; fount, whence all my being floweth;
At thy feet I cry, my Maker, let me be a fit partaker
Of this blessed food from heaven, for our good, thy glory, given.

Jesus, Bread of life, I pray thee, let me gladly here obey thee;
Never to my hurt invited, be thy love with love requited;
From this banquet let me measure, Lord, how vast and deep it's treasure;
Through the gifts thou here dost give me as thy guest in heaven receive me.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjZ3JwrXwz8>

A Reading for the Book of Exodus – Chapter Sixteen

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained to Moses and Aaron in the wilderness: "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill us all with hunger." Then the Lord said to Moses, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites. Say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.' I am going to rain bread from heaven, and each day the people may go out and gather enough for that day, with twice as much the day before the sabbath. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instructions or not."

And so it came to pass. In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When

the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "This is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat." And so they all ate and had their fill. Here ends the reading.

Psalm 78

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching* Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

I will open my mouth in a parable* I will utter dark sayings from of old,

The people tested God in their heart* By demanding the food they craved.

They spoke against God* Saying, "Can God spread a table in the wilderness?

He rained down on them manna to eat* And gave them the grain of heaven.

Mortals ate of the bread of angels* He sent them food in abundance.

He rained flesh upon them like dust* Winged birds like the sand of the seas;

And they ate and were well filled* For he gave them what they craved.

But their hearts were not steadfast* They were not true to his covenant.

Yet still he forgave their iniquity* And did not stir up all his wrath.

How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness* How they grieved him in the desert!

He remembered that they were but flesh* A wind that passes and does not return.

Then he led out his people like sheep* And guided them through the wilderness like a flock.

And he brought them to his holy hill* To the mountain that his right hand had won.

He drove out nations before them* And settled the tribes of Israel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDeWSm7dr3c>

A Reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians -- Chapter 1

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted in my body, in life and in death.

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, I am hard pressed: my desire is to depart and be with Christ is far better; but to remain in the flesh is better for you. But I know that I will remain and continue with all of you, to encourage your progress and joy in faith; that way we may share abundantly in our boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Therefore, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I am here with you or absent and only hearing about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel; that you are in no way intimidated by your opponents. This is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And it is God's doing. For God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well. Here ends the reading.

Hymn 178 - Jesus is Lord of All the Earth

Jesus is Lord of all the earth. He is the King of creation.

(refrain) Alleluia, Alleluia, Give thanks to the risen Lord,
Alleluia, Alleluia, give praise to God's Name.

Spread the good news o'er all the earth. Jesus has died and has risen. (refrain)

Come let us praise the living God, joyfully sing to our Saviour (refrain)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2ArCCRpVXM>

A Reading from the Gospel According to Matthew -- Chapter 20

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers to pick his crop. After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. At about nine

o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and said to them, 'You also go to work, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went too. And again at about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. At five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'No one has hired us.' And he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard to work.' When evening came, the owner said to his manager, 'Call all the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. But when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And so they objected saying, 'These people worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. This is unfair.' But the owner replied to them, 'Friends, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; if I choose to give to these last the same as I give to you, am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So you see," said Jesus, "the last will be first, and the first will be last."

"The last will be first, and the first will be last," Jesus is quoted as saying this time and again. In the ancient Mayan ball game *Poc-ta-Poc*, the winner of the game had the ultimate privilege of being sacrificed to the deity. Jesus' examples are not so brutal. But neither are they entirely different.

When he says, "Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for the sake of the Gospel will find it," Jesus is not trying to lure us into a way of life and a goal of death whose aim is pain and disappointment. He merely wants to reiterate the spiritual reality of the human condition for us: Hard as it is to accept, our long-term preservation and self-interest are cosmically a lower priority than what we're able to accomplish amongst our fellow human beings while we're here.

Certainly the Mayans had a similar thought in mind: dying for the greater good was more virtuous than living for the self. Does this mean each year's Super Bowl champs ought to self-immolate? No. But, if all I'm interested in is being on top of the world, the rest of my life will pale by comparison. Perhaps the glory of winning the Super Bowl might entail permanent withdraw from the sport and the expectation that the winners will thenceforth live in service to others. What a concept! Each year, 35 of the toughest, most ambitious guys agree to walk away from the gridiron battlefield and embark on careers of service. Would anybody participate?

"Virtue is its own reward, and brings with it the truest and highest pleasure; but if we cultivate it only for pleasure's sake, we are selfish, not compassionate, and will

never achieve the pleasure we desire.” So wrote John Henry Newman, the great Anglican theologian, leading to Yip Harburg’s crack: “Virtue is its own revenge.”

We simply cannot count on the results of our own imaginings, let alone our own plans, if they are oriented towards individual pleasure, accomplishment and triumph. That way is a de facto dead end. Jesus uses the paradoxes of his storytelling to illustrate this truth. Gospel means good news. Each day’s dawning offers a new array of events and permutations of opportunity to work for peace. The scene changes continually, so only our attitude towards communal life matters – the specifics can hardly be maintained. “The slow one now will later be fast, as the present now will later be past. The order is rapidly fading and the first one now will later be last; for the times they are a-changin’.”

The word ‘parable’ comes from the greek para (alongside) and ballo (to throw). So it is something that is thrown alongside. Like when you’re driving on the highway and a train is going alongside you faster or slower. Sometimes, you can even see people riding along. They’re traveling too. Sometimes sitting backwards and eating breakfast. Parabolo is unlike the word Diablo which combines ballo with dia (across) something thrown across your path so that you will either avoid or stumble over, para ballo (parable) is something thrown alongside your path, so that you can recognize some aspect of your own journey or experience, in the parable and it can propel you forward. Matthew says, “Jesus told the crowds many things, in parables; he told them nothing that was not in parables.”

When Greco-Roman culture got ahold of the parables of Jesus, they tried to turn them into full-blown allegories, with every aspect of each parable and every character in each story assumed to be representative of some aspect or character in human society. But that approach to understanding and employing the parables is untrue to their origins in 1st century Palestine. Neither are the parables simple illustrations of single points or proverbial phrases. They are not guides to religion, they are illustrations of life, compact and typically complex human narratives that parallel life experience but veer from expectation. Much like our dreams.

As the interpretation of dreams can help us understand our inner lives better and thus get along better with ourselves, the interpretation of parables will help us get along with others. Jesus uses parables to help us get used to companionship and neighbor love. Instead of saying, “Do this. Do that,” he illustrates how life works and invites us to take a stab at living well. “The Kingdom of Heaven is like... so and so.” If we get used to relating to stories that run parallel to our own story, we will have a lot better chance of relating to the lives that are running parallel to our lives, the lives of our fellow passengers, our compañeros, our neighbors.

At first, just as with our dreams, we might tend to respond to Jesus’ parables with some form of, “Huh? Jesus even teases his disciples a little about this: “I tell them everything in parables so that they will not understand.” Jesus is not interested in

giving formulas. When someone demands a formula, he does provide one: "Sell everything you have, give the money to the poor and follow me," is the formula for eternal life, for example. "Turn the other cheek," is another. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength," is the formula for fulfilling the law and the prophets. Perhaps you've noticed that none of these plans is very doable, much less likely. Jesus knows this as well as we do. His formulas are goals for approaching perfection, but he knows perfectly well none of us is going to achieve anything like perfection. He is much more interested in training us to think parabolically ourselves, to recognize something in the lives of those who travel alongside us, so that we can behave as helpful, loving companions towards one another. This is the way he would have us follow. This is the way to love God.

Ronald Peters writes, "The integrity of our relationship to God is inextricably tied to the integrity of our compassion and accountability for the welfare of those around us." We may not be able to turn the parables into formulas immediately upon hearing them, or indeed ever. But listening to them and pondering what they might hold for us in the way of resonance and creative possibility will give us direction along our Christian journeys, a better means of navigating what Salman Rushdie has called "The Ocean of the Streams of Story."

Hear what Henri Nouwen said: "God always calls. To hear that call and allow it to guide our actions requires discipline in order to prevent ourselves remaining and becoming spiritually deaf. There are so many voices calling for our attention and so many distractions that for us a serious effort is necessary if we are to have any chance of remaining sensitive to the divine presence in our lives.

One point of today's parable is God's generosity when it comes to eternal life and grace. One person is never given less than another of that. Even a deathbed repentance is sufficient to put one in right relationship with God. There is no room for envy or measurement of those who have received grace at a different time or place than yourself. Don't judge their pleasure or their pain. It's absurd. "They got to have fun, while I was behaving" is not a useful way to self-awareness.

God spreads an even amount of spiritual fulfillment over the whole of humanity. Nobody is first or last. Contrast this with the way we humans take care of ourselves, employing a strict hierarchy of who has what: it's called money. God's grace is the opposite of what humanity does in this regard. God's grace is the opposite of money. God's grace is like the manna that, frostlike, covers everything. Or like the quails that are everywhere, with just enough for everyone for today and twice on Sunday. Those who gather more than they need for today will see it rot and grow worms. Let the rich take notice.

To follow God's lead, the generosity of our love should be so wide that it confounds the world. It should be freely given, even to the point of sometimes allowing ourselves to be taken advantage of. We can show the world what we know: the laws of calculation, resource economy, currency manipulation and

control have been abolished by Christ. For now and henceforth, we must live by grace or cease to live.

Prayers

O gracious God: you have created all humanity from the same substance, and decreed that all shall forever belong to the same household. In your holy presence we are all servants; all of humankind are sheltered beneath your tabernacle, all are gathered together at your table of bounty, all are illumined through the light of your Providence.

Most holy God, you confer life upon each of us equally, and endowed each of us with talents and faculties. All of us are submerged in the ocean of your mercy. Unite us, we pray. Let the nations agree and know your creation to be one, so that we may treat each other as one family and cherish the whole earth as our one and only precious home. May we live together in harmony.

O God! Raise aloft the banner of the oneness of humankind. Establish the most great peace amongst all the peoples of the world. Cement the hearts of all together, even as we revel in our distinctions. Gladden our hearts through the fragrance of your love. Brighten our eyes through the light of your guidance. Delight our ears with the melody of your Word. Shelter us all in the stronghold of your providence. For you alone are the truly mighty and powerful. You can judge and inspire forgiving. You alone overlook the shortcomings of all and teach us forbearance, integrity and peace. *Amen*

Poem for Rosh Hashanah – *The Birthday of the World* by Marge Piercy

On the birthday of the world I begin to contemplate
What I have done and left undone, but this year not so much rebuilding

Of my perennially damaged psyche, shoring up eroding
Friendships, digging out stumps of old resentments that refuse to rot on their own.

No, this year I want to call myself to task for what
I have done and not done for peace. How much have I dared in opposition?

How much have I put on the line for freedom? For mine and others?
As these freedoms are pared, sliced and diced, where

Have I spoken out? Who have I tried to move? In
This holy season, I stand self-convicted of sloth in a time when lies choke

The mind and rhetoric bends reason to slithering
Choking pythons. Here I stand before the gates opening, the fire dazzling

My eyes, and as I approach what judges me, I judge
Myself. Give me weapons of minute destruction. Let my words turn into sparks.

Hymn 493 – O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing

O for a thousand tongues to sing my dear Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace!

Jesus! the Name that charms our fears and bids our sorrows cease;
'Tis music in the sinner's ears, 'tis life and health and peace.

He speaks; and, listening to his voice, new life the dead receive,
The mournful broken hearts rejoice, the humble poor believe.

Glory to God and praise and love be now and ever given
By saints below and saints above, the church in earth and heaven.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgzDf2NdfbU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GgCys-uRiLg>

Have a peaceful, healthy and love-filled week. Be safe, wear your masks in public, stay in touch with friends and loved ones. Reach out if you need anything, and know that you are beloved.

And the blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier be with you and yours this day and always.

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