

Proper 20, Year A (St. Peter's)
Exodus 16:2-15
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20: 1-16.
9/24/23

So, what has God done for us lately? This may seem like an impertinent question, as well as a risky one. What if our honest answer is: *Not so much?* Or even, *I don't know?* How we answer the question might be based on recent events in our life. If things are going relatively well, or if we've recently experienced something that might be called a blessing, we may be inclined to attribute our good fortune to God's generosity. Or it might be related to our mood. If we're feeling besieged, or have recently experienced a significant loss, or are just a bit grumpy, we might feel that God has been rather distant from us. If we're in good spirits, we might be more generous in our assessment. Then again, we might be having a ball, but not stop to consider that God has anything to do with it. Or if life is rather crappy, we could assume that God has been maliciously making things difficult for us.

As part of the tradition of Christian spiritual practice, we have always been encouraged to pause and reflect on God's presence in our lives, even on a daily basis. Something called the *examination of conscience* became like a daily score card to keep track of our behavior—the naughty or nice stuff. That practice has been expanded, though, to focus less on our behavior and more on our sense of the presence of God throughout the day, along with our response, becoming an examination of *consciousness*. It's based on the spiritual practice of seeking to *find God in all things*, even the things which might not seem so promising. If we become attuned to the shifts of our moods and perceptions throughout the day, we might notice those times when God seems a little closer, as well at the times we might feel somewhat desolate. The important part is to notice how we responded to these blessings and the challenges. The point is not to make us feel guilty for not doing a great job of being

spiritually aware, but to become more aware of the subtleties which counter any tendency to become negative and despairing.

There's nothing too subtle about what's going on in the Exodus story today. After having gone through their dramatic escape and liberation from the hands of the Egyptians, the Hebrew people begin to discover that there's more to the story: that getting out of Egypt was only the beginning of a somewhat arduous journey to enter the Promised Land. During that time, the biggest challenge was to keep the people from forgetting their relationship with the God who had called them forth. Here the first wave of nostalgia sets in. As life became more difficult, they longed for the safety, reliability and other benefits of slavery. At least we had plenty of bread in Egypt, they grouse! (The quail come later!) This is one of several scenes in Exodus where the bulk of the "chosen people" are shown in a starkly unfavorable light. Though there are heroic elements present, usually concentrated in the main characters of the story, the rest of the congregation comes across as fairly lame in their capacity to be steadfast and faithful. Of course, the point is that it's not easy for humans to maintain their grasp on fidelity to God and remain confident in God's provision. The attitude seems to be somewhat like: *Well, all that stuff with the red sea and killing the Egyptians was all well in good, but what about now? Have you forgotten us? Did you lead us here to die* To be fair, these people weren't a bunch of snowflakes who hadn't been able to cope with hard times, But they were very hungry, and they were scared. There was a long road ahead of them.

In any event, they weren't shy of challenging their leaders and even their God about their complaints. And the complaining seemed to pay off. But this assumes that God had been distracted or didn't consider that they might need a bit of assistance in the desert. This would be very poor planning on God's part. The story reflects what often happens when human beings are in a state of distress: we assume that God has forgotten about us. And perhaps, these are the times we might pray. But I believe if we think of petition and prayer as an effort to *change the mind of God* and consequently, the course of human

events, we are somewhat off track. I believe we pray in order to change ourselves: to open ourselves to our needs and our strengths—to allow us to articulate our deepest fears and hopes and, hopefully, to share those with others. Most importantly, we pray to move from the constriction of ourselves caused by fear and a sense of scarcity to a deeper opening to the abiding possibilities of grace which open us to an attitude of generosity.

In the gospel of Matthew, we get more complaining. This time it is the motivated and hard-working laborers who end up feeling slighted by what they see as an unfair distribution of wages. After all, they were the ones who got up early and worked for the full day. In the end they are accused of being envious because of the master's generosity. True, they don't receive any less than the others, but still they feel taken advantage of. I see their point. There seems to be something unfair about this approach for the distribution of wages. A good capitalist would never tolerate this! Beyond the specifics of economics, the more important reference may be to the simmering resentment by many who knew themselves as the chosen people who had to adjust to Jesus and the upstart Christians who came along and changed the rules in a relatively late stage of the game. There can be no doubt that the workings of God in creation can never be neatly proscribed according to our own expectations—which, frankly, annoys the heck out of us at times! Most of us have learned by now that indeed, *life is not always fair*, at least from our partial perspective. But it still chafes at us. One of the most difficult aspects of human existence is the feeling of vulnerability in the face of what we cannot control. And that's where generosity and an openness of our hearts comes in.

I believe that all significant relationship is—in a fundamental way—a surrender to a certain degree of powerlessness. Children come into the world dependent on caregivers and fortunate occurrences in both their biological disposition and their environment which hopefully will allow them to flourish. We make our way through life—hopefully making good decisions and maximizing potentially positive outcomes—and yet remain vulnerable to so many

circumstances out of our control. When and if we are fortunate enough to fall in love and have it work out reasonably well, we also discover that no matter how good our partners, our parents or our children are, they can never be everything that we want them or even need them to be. And loving someone opens us to the terrible experience of losing those we love. But to abide in loving relationship means that we continue to discover how we might become more awake and how the other might also respond in a continuing experience of repair.

Jesus invites us to counter all these things which might unsettle us by becoming more generous and grateful. This can be a big ask, especially when we feel depleted, taken for granted or even envious. But generosity and gratefulness are not transactional attitudes: a calculation of how much generosity is warranted in a given situation. And while it is felicitous when our generosity occurs spontaneously, it may be most important that we are willing to push ourselves a little sometimes. It is a matter of opening our hearts rather than calculating the risk/benefit ratio.

All of this leads back to the importance of building relationships—with God, others, and even the uncomfortable parts of ourselves. We might feel dissatisfied when the world doesn't behave in the way we might like, but if we are seeking to change ourselves—in an incremental and almost daily way—we might achieve a better sense of the graciousness around us. Perhaps it is better when our petitions to God amount to something like “help me” rather than “fix things.” When we fill the space between ourselves and others with generosity, we might find that both get done.

In her book *Seven Sacred Pauses*, which is about the spiritual discipline of pausing during the day to be reflective and aware of the flow of things, writer Macrina Wiederkehr describes both the challenge and the possibility of opening ourselves with a generous heart. She writes:

I don't always rise at dawn to watch for God, nor do I consistently awaken with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving. There are times when the wings of my heart remain folded; yet prayer still happens in me. There are mornings where I simply sit in silence trying to remember some of the things that need to rise in me:

*--a tolerance for those who don't agree with me,
--a refusal to judge others
--a willingness to forgive,
--greater effort to live with a non-violent heart,
--loving thoughts toward those who don't exactly dote on me,
-a calm and hopeful spirit in the midst of my anxieties
--discipline in my daily personal prayer,
—attention and faithfulness in my daily work,
--a holy anger for injustice in our world.*

As I remember these necessary risings in my life, the wings of my heart slowly begin to unfold.

So let us pray for strength and for courage, but most of all for a capacity to embrace what feels vulnerable and to notice when the *wings of our hearts* begin to unfold, so that we will not feel so alone.