

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 25, 2011



Mercy, Pity, Humor & Irony

a sermon by the Rev. Warren L. Pittman

texts: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78, 1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

If the weather yesterday had in any way “dampened” my spirits, what with the valiant effort put on by all to hold a Rummage Sale between cloudbursts, I was lifted up at the end of the morning when Henry Coble came to fulfill his time-honored responsibility of “holding the bag” – the money bag, that is – until a formal cash count could be taken and a bank deposit made.

As he came up the walkway, he greeted me with the comment, “This is what happens when we pray for rain.”

As I offered the Collect of the Day this morning, I recalled Henry’s words, but resisted the temptation to add a phrase, out loud.

“O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: *often with a good dose of humor and irony! ...*”

It was not just God “raining on our parade” yesterday, but also the way in which I have come to picture today’s episode in the Exodus story that tempts me so.

The Hebrew people are still wandering through the Sinai, spending their days, by the way the story is told, perfecting what their descendants in few millennia would call *kvetching*.

They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

Last week, remember, the people were whining to Moses about how *hungry* they were, and now they complain about not having enough water to wash down the quail and manna-bread sandwiches God miraculously has provided for them, every-day-and-twice-on-Friday.

God responds to this *kvetch-du-jour* with “mercy and pity.”

“Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink...”

But I imagine the rock at Horeb, when struck, not producing an artesian spring, or a babbling brook, but something of a broken Bedouin fire hydrant, spraying all six hundred thousand thirsty Israelites, crowding in closely with their bota bags, buckets, and canteens with a real gusher! “You want water? I got your water right here!”

I’m not alone in picturing it this way: didn’t we all just sing how God “...*split the hard rocks in the wilderness * and gave them drink as from the great deep. God brought streams out of the cliff, * and the waters gushed out like rivers.*” Later in the same psalm, there is a verse about how “...*the gullies overflowed.*”

“...*mercy and pity,*...” yes, but every so often with a healthy dose of humor and irony.

Thanks be to God for that humor and irony! The people, delivered from slavery and oppression, escaping with not all that much to sustain themselves into the wilderness, have been given “daily bread,” meat, and now water, and yet they will still miss the point, and wish they were back in “Good Old Egypt.” That they were slaves is a detail they seem to have let slip their minds.

They still do not understand that **God provides**. It’s a fundamental message consistently resounding through all the pages of scripture, and yet rarely taken to heart. Even in the face of human infidelity, God is faithful: God provides enough for all.

The “myth of scarcity” is a human creation: we are the ones who get it into our heads, and put it into the heads of others that there is *not* enough to go around, and we fear that if we don’t get what we think we need for ourselves, we will be left out.

Jesus is teaching in the temple, generously sharing God’s Word, God’s Good News with whomever will listen. The “*chief priests and the elders of the people*” question him, and question his authority.

They are the trustees of all things “Godly,” and seem, by the way the Gospels portray them, to be concerned about the “scarcity” of God’s love. That an uncertified preacher is working outside the carefully legislated religious system worries them, especially when they see the sort of people who are paying attention to him. There’s only so much of God’s love to go around, as far as they’re concerned, and it needs to be reserved for the chosen; this Jesus talks and acts as though there is more than enough for all!

They challenge his authority, and he, I imagine with some Godly “humor and irony” offers them a parable. Now, some of Jesus’ parables are meant to get you thinking and wondering as layer after layer of meaning unfolds, but today he keeps it real simple:

“A man asks his sons to help out in the family vineyard. One says, ‘No,’ but later goes out and works; the other says ‘Yes,’ but never shows up. Now, you wise interpreters of God’s Word and Law, you whose responsibility it is to guide us in living our lives as God would have them lived, you who explore all the subtle ramifications and intricacies of the faith, which son did what he was asked to do?”

How foolish they must have sounded in replying, “The one who did what the father asked was the one who did what the father asked.” Like anyone could flunk that quiz! *Anyone* could figure that one out, which is exactly what Jesus wants them – the experts in and custodians of all things holy – to learn. God’s love is accessible to any and all, even the ones whom the chief priests’ and elders’ “myth of scarcity” say are unloveable, the “tax collectors and harlots.”

And then he offers his adversaries some shockingly Good News: “Truly I tell you, Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

They’re shocked, but they cannot hear it as Good News; and if we’re not careful, we may not hear it as Good News either. In the economy of God’s abundant love for all, it may very well be that “tax collectors and harlots” go into the kingdom of heaven, but don’t overlook that Jesus says that they do so “*ahead of you.*”

Last week, Jesus was offering the same Good News when he said that “the last shall be first,” but he also said “the first shall be last.” If God’s love were “restricted” or “limited,” then Jesus would have said “the last shall be first, and the first shall be *left out,*” and “tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God *instead* of you,” but he doesn’t!

The psalmist said *“I will open my mouth in a parable; * I will declare the mysteries of ancient times.”*

So, I’m working on a parable for all this. “The kingdom of heaven is like a jumbo jet, and the ground crew has provided passes for orderly boarding. Everyone has a number on her or his pass, and boarding will be by the numbers. We welcome our Platinum-Level-Gazillion-Million-Mile-Primo-Class -You-Yacht-With-The-CEO flyers to take a seat out in the boarding area, while we let Standbys and folks with Seating Area #10 passes get on the plane ahead of you.”

“The Good News is that this flight cannot be oversold: there is room for all, and if you pay attention to the pre-flight instructions that our Purser, Paul, wrote to you, about how:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 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 ...

... you will **all** get on the plane, and will **all** get to your destination at the same time.”

The only way you can miss the flight is to refuse to board.

If that’s the case, well then, as far as God’s mercy and pity, and humor and irony are concerned, the joke will be on you.

AMEN.