

24 September 2023, 17 Pentecost (Proper 20A, Track 1)
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Exodus 16:2-15
Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

From Celebration to Complaint and Back Again

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. Amen.

Today, as we have for the last couple of weeks, we will continue reflecting on the future of our ministry together. We've been celebrating, and we have much to celebrate. Even as we are just beginning to imagine our ministry together, we are called to celebrate now. We will continue to celebrate together, sharing with and taking care of one another. We will continue to worship together, being fed by Word and Sacrament. We will continue to go out together to do the work God is calling us to do, making God's love and reconciliation known in every place we go and to every person we meet.

The core of our celebration, the thing that sustains and will sustain us, is loving relationship with God and each other. These relationships aren't separate at all. To be in loving relationship with God, we must be in loving relationship with each other, and when we are in loving relationship with one another, we are in loving relationship with God. To remain in loving relationship, we need to let go of anything that impairs our relationship with God or each other.

That's all well and good, but celebration can quickly sour when reality sets in. Church membership and attendance are shrinking. Sunday services are no longer the only game in town: countless other events and activities compete for our time. Church buildings require costly maintenance and often aren't designed for current needs, expenses mount, and our neighbors have real needs for financial assistance and spiritual care. Celebration can quickly give way to complaint. How do we celebrate when we have so much work to

do, when there are so many sources of anxiety, when there is so much to complain about? When celebration turns to complaint, how do we get back again? Today's lessons from Exodus and Matthew have something to say about that.

In Exodus, we encounter the Israelites a month after leaving Egypt. Their celebration began before they left Egypt. And, though Pharaoh eventually let them leave, he pursued them, pinning them up against the sea. Having already survived much, now the food they brought with them has nearly run out. They face a real need giving rise to real complaints about a very earthly, but essential, matter. Without food, they will die in the wilderness.

Now, God is not happy about their complaining, and can't you sympathize? I imagine God wanting to say, "Folks, did you miss everything I did right in front of you? Remember everything that finally got Pharaoh to let you go? Remember the sea? Remember the pillars of cloud and fire? Do you really think I would let you starve? Do you really think I can't provide you food?"

Despite this frustration, God provides them food. The Israelites' need is real and justified, but their focus is wrong. As hard as it must have been, their focus should have been on trusting the God who liberated them, not on their anxiety. Their celebration became complaint the minute they let anxiety overshadow their belief that God loves them and would take care of them. God provides for their earthly needs – but that provision comes with another lesson. Each day, they will have only what they need – no more, no less.

The Israelites are not wrong in their need for food. They are not even wrong about asking about food. They are wrong in complaining. They only needed to ask what God's plan was for providing food in the wilderness. Instead, in complaining, they assumed that it was Moses and Aaron's job to provide food. Just a month out, they had already forgotten all God had done.

In Matthew, we get Jesus' parable about laborers in a vineyard, which seems to run counter to everything we know. Laborers are called to work in a vineyard at different times of day. Some work many hours, some fewer, some only one hour. Yet, they all get the same wage. It seems that those who worked all day are justified in their grumbling. They worked more; shouldn't they get more? The laborers who worked harder take this complaint to the landowner, who rebuffs them for complaining about his generosity.

Like the Israelites, though, the laborers' focus is wrong. They are focused on receiving payment. Their work is a means to an end. This, though, is no ordinary vineyard. This vineyard is the kingdom of heaven. The reward is not payment for the work. The reward is the privilege of working in the vineyard.

This parable has been interpreted as an allegory for our work to advance God's mission of restoring all people to unity with God and one another.¹ Whenever we begin that work – whether as infants, adolescents, adults, or even on the brink of death – and even if we take breaks from that work, our reward is the same. Our reward is not the daily wage, but the privilege of participating in God's life and work to restore the world to the goodness and love God intended in creation. In this parable, the laborers celebrate having work to do, complain when they receive their wage, and are pointed back to celebrating the landowner's generosity and the fact that he let them work in the vineyard.

So, what about us? How do we return to celebration when faced with stark reality? In his book *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time*, Alan Roxburgh addresses anxiety over the changing Church. Roxburgh acknowledges that the Church as we have known it is often ill suited to our present context. He argues that we need to look with hope at the new ways in which God is calling us to be the Church, embracing both traditional and new ways of being communities of faith.

Roxburgh uses this Augustine quote to make his point: "God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are always too full to receive them."² With what are our hands too full? Roxburgh writes, "our hands can be too full with our fears and sense of loss for us to see or receive the good things God is doing among us. Can we trust and open for these good things, even in the midst of our fear?"³

Rather than look at changes in the Church with fear, anxiety, and loss, Roxburgh argues that we should look at these changes with hope. He writes, "We become so engrossed in our own perceptions of what's important that we miss the wonder and presence of God in the lives around us."⁴ To get

¹ See Book of Common Prayer, p. 855.

² Roxburgh, Alan J.. *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time* (p. 7). Church Publishing Incorporated. Kindle Edition.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Roxburgh, p. 12.

there, we need to believe, in Roxburgh's words, that God is "up to something"⁵ and that we are surrounded by stories of the Holy Spirit being "ahead of us, moving in the everydayness of our neighborhoods, if we just have the ears to hear them."⁶ Roxburgh believes that "[w]e are embarking on a shared journey to discern what the Spirit is up to ahead of us in our neighborhoods and to join God in these places."⁷

Friends, there is much that will rob us of our celebration – if we let it. Our celebration can easily turn into genuine complaints born of anxiety and fear. But that is not who we are called to be as the People of God. We are called to hope. Like the Israelites and the laborers, we are called to believe that God is both in our midst and out ahead of us. We are called to believe that the core of our work and ministry is not getting people in the pews or having collection plates overflowing. The core of our work is God's work. We are to make God's liberating, reconciling love manifest in our world filled with hurts. In doing that, we are to trust that the rest will follow, that God will ensure we have what we need. Mission and ministry come first. Those are our focus. That is how, when we move from celebration to complaint, we get back to celebration again.

Amen.

⁵ Roxburgh, p. 16.

⁶ Roxburgh, p. 8.

⁷ Roxburgh, p. 27.