

LECTIONARY REFLECTIONS, PROPER 22, YEAR A

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Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

In this reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, God is delivering to Moses (who has come before Him on behalf of the Israelites) the laws and expectations by which God demands that the Israelites live if they are to be His Chosen People. We know these laws as the “Ten Commandments.” Four of the laws have to do with God’s sovereignty in His relationship with the Israelites, and six of the laws concern the Israelites’ relationships with one another and with their neighbors. In communicating these laws to the Israelites, Moses conveys the importance of receiving the “fear of the Lord” upon them. In other words, if we are to avoid sin and to remain in right relationship with God, we are to have a right fear of God. What does this mean? This does not mean that we are to be terrified or that we are to cower in fright and avoid relationship with God. It does mean that we are to have a proper reverence and awe for God. Such reverence and awe is a *right* fear of God. Observing the Ten Commandments will lead us into such a proper fear.

Are you afraid of God or do you hold him in fear? There is a difference. Being afraid of God means fearing any relationship with Him which could ultimately be life-giving. But to have awe and reverence for God means that we believe in abiding by the wishes and expectations of that God. What does God expect of you?

Psalm 19

This Psalm of praise is divided into three parts. The first part sings the praises of the heavens of God and the glory that his handiwork shows. The author of the Psalm sees a connectedness throughout all creation – with links between one day and another, and connection from one night to the next. If we think of one day telling its story to another, than today is connected back to the first day of Creation, which is a pretty phenomenal thought! The second part of the Psalm (beginning with verse 7) sings the praises of God’s law and judgements. If we embrace a relationship with God’s statutes and commandments, then we can trust that our soul will be revived, our heart will rejoice, and we will see the way clearly. The final part of the Psalm (beginning with verse 9) is about the fear of Lord – how it is clean and leads us to right judgement which is to be desired more than the finest gold.

Are you looking to correct your relationship with God? The Psalmist suggests starting with considering the glory of God as it is revealed in Creation. Such reflection will naturally lead to a desire to be in right relationship with God, to wanting to observe his commandments, to developing awe and reverence for Him. Do you want to begin the journey? Start by taking a walk in Creation and by allowing yourself to marvel at what you see!

Philippians 3:4b-14

In this excerpt from the letter to the Church at Philippi, Paul identifies the ultimate good: "...the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord..." This is a good above all else and is better than any human effort to be good. Paul elaborates that such knowledge of Christ Jesus comes from a righteousness that is based on faith and not human labor. Paul's goal (and a worthy goal for us) is to become like Christ in his death. This means that we are to empty ourselves for the sake of others...not in some self-sacrificial demeaning way, but in a way that lifts others up and blesses them. If there is any human effort that we can exert, Paul says, it is to run after this knowledge and this way of life as if we are running a race.

Are there people that God has placed in your life that you can bless? People whose lives you can brighten by your own knowledge of Christ? This could be as simple as a small act of kindness, such as offering a smile to someone who is frowning, or taking the time to sit and listen to someone who is troubled. Who are the people that God has placed around you and what do they need?

Matthew 21:33-46

This story from Matthew is another allegory about the vineyard, with the vineyard representing the Kingdom of God. Jesus tells this story to indicate God has given the vineyard (Kingdom) to tenants and has provided them with everything they need to produce successful fruit. The tenants are deceitful and greedy, however, and keep the produce for themselves while killing the emissaries that God has sent to receive the produce. In the end, the vineyard is taken from those who did not safeguard it and given to others who are more faithful. From this allegory, we learn three things. First, God has designed the vineyard to produce fruit. The ground is not lying fallow. The soil is not poor, and the seeds are not substandard. God intends prolific production. Second, God **expects** fruit and plans for its production. This is not a matter of there not being any fruit. The produce is there but the tenants are hiding it and are not giving it to its rightful owner. And third, if those who are tending the vineyard are dishonest or untrustworthy, there will be consequences. God does not leave vineyards in the safekeeping of those who have proven themselves false.

What has God given you to tend? Does it occur to you that he has planned for and expects you to tend that faithfully so that fruit is produced? Where have you been faithful and where have you been false? Can you embrace the powerful idea that God has given you everything you need so as to produce good fruit that you can in turn give back to Him?

COLLECT:

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.