

LECTIONARY REFLECTIONS PROPER 23A

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October 11, 2020 – The Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Exodus 32:1-14

Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

Exodus 32:1-14

This wonderful reading from the Hebrew Scriptures enables us to look at what happens whenever a vacuum in leadership exists. Incapable of connecting to God on their own, the Hebrew people depend on a leader to build their relationship with God for them. Moses has gone up to the mountain to do just that, but he has been gone for a while. When a strong leader is not present, the people become anxious, fractured, and contentious. They turn to Moses' second in command, Aaron, and ask that he erect an altar at which they can worship and fashion a God with whom they can be in relationship. Aaron, unfortunately, steers them in the wrong direction. Using their jewelry and things they have plundered from the Egyptians, Aaron creates a golden calf which he commands the Hebrew people to worship. This, of course, is idolatry which God has forbidden; and their actions anger the Most High. He alerts Moses to the situation. Moses' inclination is to stand up on behalf of the people and pray for them. At first, God is not interested in the prayers of Moses, but Moses insists. He begs earnestly for the future of Israel, and God finally relents and seemingly changes his mind about destroying the Israelites.

When there seems to be no strong sense of leadership in your own life, either through your own sense of self or through others, what do you follow? On what do you depend to keep you grounded in God's word and will? For whatever reason, and we often do not understand those reasons, God's prayer economy thrives on our intercessions for others. Do you find yourself "standing in the breach" in your prayers for yourself or others? For what person or situation in your own world would you like to see God change His mind?

Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

These verses from Psalm 106 comprise a psalm in praise of those who act with justice and do what is right. Throughout we hear a longing for the psalmist to see the prosperity of those chosen by God as His elect. There is a remembrance of the human tendency to "deal down" when the Israelites in the desert exchanged their glory of being God's chosen ones for something less than adequate – a cow who feeds on grass. The Psalm also reminds the reader of the consequences of *forgetting* what God has accomplished in our lives. The words stress the importance of constant remembrance of what God has done for us. Just as Moses stood in the breach and turned away the wrath of God, so we are commanded to stand before God and implore His mercy for ourselves and for others.

It seems remarkable to us that we might forget the extraordinary ways in which God has intervened in our lives. But we do. Just as the Hebrew people forgot God's mighty deliverance of them out of slavery, we forget our limitless freedom from sin through our deliverance by Jesus' death on the cross.

How might we start each day so that we remember the powerful presence of God in our lives and His liberation of our souls to be in communion with Him?

Philippians 4:1-9

Who are Eudia and Syntyche? Paul identifies them as two women who have struggled beside him in the work of the gospel. We sense Paul's great respect for these women. Traditionally they have been known to have been in disagreement with each other, and Paul was perhaps interested in their argument. We never learn the nature of their disagreement, but Paul is clear in urging them to agree in the Lord, because disagreement undermines unity. He also urges the rest of the community to help and support them in this unity. On the tails of this plea, he adds some advice about prayer and about how to live in the Lord. Those who follow Jesus are to rejoice and to know that peace is with them. This peace will guard their hearts from harm. But there is also something that followers can do to help themselves in this guarding process. Paul tells them that "...whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things..." This suggests that Christians have some agency in controlling the environment to which they expose themselves. Their gaze should be turned to that which enriches, edifies and supports a relationship in Christ and not toward that which has potential to undermine that relationship.

Where is your gaze directed? On what things do you think? To what do you expose yourself on a daily basis in terms of television, internet, literature, conversation, social gatherings, etc.? Does this exposure strengthen your relationship with Jesus or undermine it? It might be useful to do an inventory on the things to which you subject yourself each day and then make adjustments accordingly.

Matthew 22:1-14

Matthew's lesson today is another allegory about the Kingdom of God with some troubling undertones. A king gives a wedding banquet for his son but those whom he invited refuse to come. God has called the world to himself through His Son Jesus, but those originally invited (Scribes, Pharisees, religious leaders of the day) do not come. Even worse, some of them have a history of killing the king's slaves (prophets, etc.). So, in response, God opens up the wedding banquet to all people, good and bad. This is an extraordinary act of grace, and we sense our hearts uplifted by this generosity. But suddenly the story shifts uncomfortably. The king notices a guest who is not wearing a wedding robe, and so he has him thrown out and condemns him to judgment. How can this be, we wonder?! Just when we are settling comfortably into the idea of this generous God, He surprises us. Our understanding of the Good News of this reading hinges on our understanding of what is meant by the wedding robe. In that day, wedding garments were *de rigor* for attendance at weddings. People had ample notice to acquire them and even if they couldn't, there would be provision made at the door. It is inconceivable that one would be able to get into a banquet without such a garment. Our theology teaches us that one gains entrance to the Kingdom of God through grace and mercy. Such grace and mercy is acquired through relationship with Jesus Christ. Perhaps we need to understand that the "wedding robe" is allegorical for this grace, this mercy, and this unique relationship with Jesus. This is Good News, because all of that is readily available to any of us without any extraordinary effort on our part beyond just putting the robe on!

How ready are you to abandon and let go of your efforts to gain Salvation. How ready are you to accept the wedding robe of grace, mercy and relationship that Jesus offers you?

COLLECT

Lord we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.