

Year A, The 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)  
September 20, 2020  
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.”

You know that feeling? Either as the one complained about or to or as the one doing the complaining, when there is no evident recourse, no clear satisfaction in the offing, where you have no apparent power to change the situation; you know what that feels like. It feels terrible. Terrible.

Good morning everyone! It is a chilly morning here under the Deer Isle Bridge. I am just back from vacation, it was a good one. Thank you for the time away. We did a little camping, a goodly amount of relaxing and a lot of work around the place. Eight months in a new home and you get to know what rough edges need smoothing. I also had a lot of quiet time on the porch reading, one of my happy places. And, I am glad to be back with you all. Fall is nearly here, and gloriously. Despite the trauma of the pandemic, our climate, our politics and our economy, Fall’s arrival reminds us that that big wheel keeps on turning, the new rises as the old fades, and each day is a gift for which we owe our gratitude to God. It is good to be back!

We’re going to be with Exodus for a few weeks, which is fitting as it sometimes feels that we the people of the United States are wondering in a wilderness right now. Just this weekend there is much grief over Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg’s death, and a volatile mix of anger and rejoicing about her replacement possibly happening in an election year when a very different stance was taken in 2016. Leadership is primarily a moral activity and too many of our leaders are failing, morally. Contrary to what some high officials have said this week, being required to wear masks is not the same violation of freedom as slavery; anti-racism education is not child abuse; the FBI serves the people, not a government. Those are not partisan statements; they are true, and Truth is the business of the church. Morality is the business of the church. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was put to death by immoral, self-interested leaders, meaning that holding the powerful to account is a foundational value of our faith. Whether we approve of or vote for someone or not, we must hold our leaders to moral, truth-telling standards informed by our faith.

So today’s readings are right on. They are about grumbling, and I don’t know about you but I am hearing (and doing) a fair amount of grumbling recently. These readings are about complaining, again, a lot of us are on the complaint-train right now. These readings address a central aspect of the human condition: being dissatisfied with how things are. Very few people are satisfied with how things are right now, at least very few I have encountered.

And... as Holy Scripture (and Jesus) are wont to do, there is a paradox in these readings. They are just as much about dissatisfaction with the world as they are about the grace of God, how God values, blesses and sustains us in our little lives and how hard it can be for us to see those blessings, to recognize God's sustaining acts, to know the Grace that perpetually pours down upon us. That is a lot weight carried in a little story about manna in the wilderness and a parable about folks getting equal pay for unequal work.

The people of Israel feared starvation in the wilderness. They longed for the fleshpots of Egypt and bellies full of bread, forgetting the cost of slavery. The grass is always greener... And the parable of the workers in the vineyard, this is Jesus' direct response to the disciples complaining to Him about their reward. They reminded Jesus of all they had given up to follow Him and Jesus reminded them that "everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters... (and so on) ...will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." The parable tells us how God values us in ways very foreign to human standards of fairness or notions of earning favor or being deserving of reward. The last will be first and the first will be last.

This stuff is challenging to the core of what it means to be human. Imagine wandering the desert, food is running out, no one seems to know where to go, what to do... (and they didn't, 40 years of wandering is proof positive of that). At the very least I'd send a letter to the editor expressing my lack of confidence in the leadership of Moses and Aaron. And the disciples, they had given up everything, and here are all these new people, weekend disciples and Jesus is implying that their reward will be the same as those who gave up everything? And His use of this parable... everyone can relate to this story. You work longer, harder, better... you deserve more, your labor is more valuable than someone who did "less." Who wouldn't be upset that someone was given the same even though they did less. That diminishes the value of what you did, isn't "moral hazard" an economic term regarding the danger of unearned rewards? But it is not our calculus of value that matters, it is God's. God values us based not on the quantity or quality of what we produce, or how hard we work, or what we *deserve* by any human figuring. God values us for who we are and what we need, and seems time and time again to side with the hard up, the annoying, the difficult, the broken, certainly the repentant, no matter the horror of their pre-repentance sins. More elegantly, the liberation theologians recognized this as the "preferential option for the poor." God *prefers* the existential underdog. God is on the side of the loser. God was crucified at the request of His own people after being abandoned by nearly everyone who loved Him, this first-is-last/last-is-first

theology couldn't have a more clear manifestation than in the Good Friday-Easter story. That is a liberating message if you are among the last, it is a bit more complicated if you find yourself among the first, no?

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is in these two stories, the summation of all the law and the prophets are here in these verses. If you can truly hold in your heart their truth, what they imply, how it directs us to conduct ourselves in the world, that might be a fair definition of salvation. You would know that God was for you, and knowing that, who could be against you? These are critical notions in our understanding of Jesus' life and ministry and the very nature of God. I spent a lot of time really wrestling with this, with how to sum it all up and in not some hidden-blessing-in-the-midst-of-tragedy kind of formula, because that is not satisfactory. But then Anne Gilchrist sent me something yesterday after Morning Prayer that brings it together for us in a way that is very helpful. I am going to leave bringin it all together to the humble graces of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's greatest prophets, the venerable Howard Thurman. In his meditation "Our Little Lives", he holds our dissatisfaction, God's immanent and transcendent justice, and the limitless outpouring of Grace upon the whole world, all together in his great big heart. He near perfectly describes what the people of Israel in the wilderness and Jesus' disciples sought, that we seek, that every human longs for in this sin-sick world that is also the subject and object of God's never-failing love and eternal grace.

This is from *Meditations of the Heart*, Thurman's 1953 collection of prayers and meditations.

### Our Little Lives

by Howard Thurman

Our little lives, our big problems—these we place upon Thy altar!  
The quietness in Thy Temple of Silence again and again rebuffs us:  
For some there is no discipline to hold them steady in the waiting  
And the minds reject the noiseless invasion of Thy Spirit.  
For some there is no will to offer what is central in the thoughts—  
The confusion is so manifest, there is no starting place to take hold.  
For some the evils of the world tear down all concentrations  
And scatter the focus of the high resolves.  
War and the threat of war has covered us with heavy shadows,  
Making the days big with forebodings—

The nights crowded with frenzied dreams and restless churnings.  
We do not know how to do what we know to do.  
We do not know how to be what we know to be.  
Our little lives, our big problems—these we place upon Thy altar!  
Brood over our spirits, Our Father,  
Blow upon whatever dream Thou hast for us  
That there may glow once again upon our hearths  
The light from Thy altar.  
Pour out upon us whatever our spirits need of shock, of lift,  
of release  
That we may find strength for these days—  
Courage and hope for tomorrow.  
In confidence we rest in Thy sustaining grace  
Which makes possible triumph in defeat, gain in loss, and  
love in hate.  
We rejoice this day to say:  
Our little lives, our big problems—these we place upon Thy altar!”

I think what Thurman is teaching us is that the more important the moment, the greater the risk, the more monumental the consequences, the more important it becomes to let go, let God, as our friends in recovery would say. The big things, like where it burns and where it rains, who gets sick and who stays healthy, who has and has not, life and death... those are not in our hands. Even the fate of our nation, no single hand, or self-chosen few will make or break our collective future. Our lives are small, our problems are big... what else can we do but place them before God and rely on God's grace and hope that we recognize that Grace for the holy gift that it is. Rely on God to teach us that triumph is possible in defeat, gain may come in loss, love can arise out of hate. That is God scale, and we realize that when we place our lives and our problems on the altar of God. Accept the grace that God will dispense. Pray that you recognize it as such. What else is there for us to do? AMEN