

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

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To say that this week's global news has been heart-wrenching is an understatement. It's hard to wrap our minds around the destruction we've seen only through pictures, in the images of devastation from hurricanes in the Caribbean and from the earthquake in Mexico City, not to mention similar images we've seen recently from Texas, Louisiana, Florida, and other areas hard hit by the forces of nature. If it's hard for us to see these things, what must it be like to experience them first-hand? With only a few exceptions among us, we cannot know the answer to that question; I don't think we can even imagine it. But these are occasions for us to remember that we are all connected by our shared humanity, and our appropriate response calls for much more than just prayers fueled by compassion and sympathy. If you who have already made contributions to support those impacted by these natural disasters, thank you. At the end of our service today, we'll be asking for your help in specific ways, and I have no doubt you will be generous in your response.

Whenever other members of our human family suffer as those folks are suffering, I'm always touched by their gratitude for things we seem to take for granted. We often hear people make comments like, "we lost everything we owned, but we're thankful to be alive." Their thanksgivings continue for first-responders, for those who bring the basics of life: water, food, shelter. When you have nothing, blessings are easier to recognize and be grateful for. The rest of us can learn from them by *remembering* to be grateful for what we have, being careful that our gratitude isn't expressed because we have more than others have. Today we can learn about gratitude from the Old Testament and Gospel readings, although the lessons they teach us may come from our realization that we're sometimes just like the people described in them.

Let's begin with the Israelites as they journey through the desert on their way to the Promised Land. Scholars say that at the time of this passage, the exiles have been on the road for one month. Already they've stopped seven times and complained three times. They first complained because Moses led them away from Egypt; looking back, they think they were much better off as slaves there than they are traveling through the wilderness. Next, they complained at Marah, where they said the water was so bitter they couldn't drink it. So there God gave Moses a sweet branch that made the water taste good, then led them to an oasis, with twelve streams of water, surrounded by seventy palm trees. Now they're complaining again, this time they're hungry, and they blame Moses and Aaron for everything that's wrong. That's what we do, isn't it? When we're unhappy about something, we always look for someone to blame and criticize. It's the easiest thing to do.

We know God was the one who orchestrated the great exile, and God was the one who instructed and guided Moses to lead them. It doesn't surprise us that hearing their complaints, God provides for them once again, with manna from heaven for breakfast and the tasty meat of quail for dinner. God loves the Israelites and will preserve and protect them. We know that God always comes through for them. But they haven't figured that out yet. They haven't learned to trust God, so they're fearful and easily disturbed by even the smallest disadvantages. And there will be other episodes of distrust and discontent, even worse than this one, before the Israelites learn God is on their side. Are we like them in that regard, I wonder? We can clearly see God's hand in everything that happens to the Israelites. Over and over again, scripture tells us how much God cares for them. Doesn't God love us, too? Isn't that what Jesus tells us in the Gospels, and proves to us through his life, death, and resurrection? What will it take for *us* to learn that God is on our side, too?

Like today's story about the wandering Israelites, the parable of the laborers also involves grumbling, but it's a different kind. This seems to be more about entitlement and fairness. It's harvest time at the vineyard, so at six a.m. the owner goes to the marketplace where people are standing around waiting for someone like him to come offer them a day's work. They agree on the

going rate—a denarius for the day, probably with lunch thrown in. But there’s a big harvest to be made, so at nine the owner goes back to the corner and hires another group of workers. This time he promises only to pay them what’s fair and they accept. He goes back at noon, and again at three, and then one last time when both the day and the work are almost finished. Surprisingly, there are some guys standing there waiting. Maybe they slept late that day, or maybe they were working somewhere else before they came to the corner. Why they’re late isn’t important. The owner hires them, too, and that’s all we need to know.

The Torah says “you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.” So at quitting time the owner begins to pay everyone. He starts with the latecomers who weren’t even hired until five o’clock in the afternoon and did barely any work at all. When he pays them for a full day, it’s a surprise to all the workers, especially to them. Everyone else who worked that day gets excited thinking they’ll be paid in proportion to the hours they worked. But they all get the same pay. “It’s not fair!” say the workers who were there all day. Their complaints don’t faze the owner. “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?” It’s hard to argue with *that*, or to argue with his position that he can do what he wishes with whatever belongs to him. The first will be last and the last will be first and that is Good News for us!

We’ve heard these lessons often enough to understand their point is to remind us of God’s radical generosity. God gives the Israelites what they need to sustain their lives. Manna in the morning and meat in the evening may not compare to the fleshpots of Egypt, but certainly will keep them alive and give them enough strength to reach the land of milk and honey God has promised them. I wonder if that old saying “beggars can’t be choosers” came from this passage. I also wonder if they would have reached the Promised Land sooner if they had stopped complaining and started saying thank you! And as for those day workers and their envy over other people’s wages, that *could* be a modern day story. There again, God, portrayed by the owner of the vineyard, is generous and fair. Every worker is compensated—even those who don’t necessarily deserve what they receive, and at one time or another that could be any of them. On the last day, it will surely be all of us.

Because God is generous to us, God expects us to be generous to each other. It’s part of that “love thy neighbor as thyself” business about being a Christian and acting like one. Generosity isn’t always about the way we share our material blessings, as important as that is. Just as God looks on us with favor, we’re called to treat each other with respect: to love each other, to speak to and about each other as we would like to be spoken to and about, to give each other the benefit of the doubt, to trust that every one of us is doing the best we can—and sometimes to trust that we don’t know the whole story about someone else. Sometimes it’s hard to do that. It’s probably really hard for God to do it with us sometimes too, although it surely comes more naturally for God than it does for us. Everything we say to each other and everything we do for and with others must be weighed and measured to see if it meets the “God” test: the test of a generous and giving spirit. That can happen only when we remember to give thanks for all God has given us.

A good place to start, now and every day, is The General Thanksgiving from Morning Prayer found on Page 101 in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Turn to it now, please. It gives us words of thanksgiving to God and also acknowledges that just as God is kind, loving, and generous to us, so we are called to be to one another. Page 101. Let’s pray together:

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen.