

September 20, 2020 16<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost Sermon notes

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

“It is not what I expected”

The Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation has invented a new character to advertise its products called a “Dream Coach” whose most familiar line is ‘you can dream bigger’. There is a program on television featuring a host who will help you build that ‘million dollar dream home’ when you win the lottery. People often discuss what they would do if they won a large sum of money and yet the statistics of those who have won continue to show a large percentage of them falling into disaster shortly after the win. There are a thousand reasons why this is so and I’m not here to argue the merits or demerits of lotteries - you need to make up your own mind on that - I am just struck by the reality that it is quite common for people to experience a negative reaction even when granted a tremendous boon.

I had been applying for teaching jobs after I graduated with a Bachelor of Education degree and I was hired to fill in for a teacher from January to the end of the school year in June. It was the kind of job I was looking for - teaching math in a high school. I was on my way into the teaching profession which I believed was God’s choice for me. I believed this would be the beginning of a wonderful career but it did come with some surprises that threatened to erase my feelings of elation. My biggest surprise came when one of my students walked to the front of the room, towering over me, and asked, ‘what would you do if I hit you?’ This was not in my list of expectations whatsoever. For some reason I simply chose to say, “I would fall down - but then you would be on your way to the office”. He turned, satisfied with my answer, and went back to his seat. To say that this event was not what I was expecting is a massive understatement but events that we don’t expect happen to us all the time and we are asked to adapt. Whether it is the unexpected changes that occur when we finally realize the dream for which we have been waiting or the unseen complications that come making the best of a bad situation was the advice I was always given by my parents. My mother taught me the serenity prayer when I was quite young and it has been a helpful reminder that there are some things that I cannot change and what I need is not a change of situation but serenity to accept those things. I thank God for the serenity to accept the situation in which I found myself in my first full-time teaching position. How about you? Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you achieved a dream but when the reality dawned it wasn’t what you expected? These unexpected circumstances help make life exciting and interesting but they all bring a level of dismay and complaint. Even when we are given the good things we ask for, like a full-time teaching job, there is a very good chance that there will be large elements of that gift that are not what we were expecting.

The people of Israel had been granted their long held dream - freedom from the Egyptians and a return to their Promised Land. The God who called Abraham had rescued them in spectacular fashion - parting the sea - and was leading them on their journey with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. But then they began to run out of food and the dream lost its luster. They complained about their state of affairs and even began to re-interpret their experiences in Egypt by concluding that a life of slavery was preferable to dying in the wilderness. This portion of their story ends with another rescue by the God whom they followed as they learned what it really meant to be the chosen people on a journey to the Promised Land. There was to be a wonderful outcome but in the meantime some faith and work needed to be applied. The serenity to accept things they could not change was not part of their lives as yet but they were to be reminded that God was their partner and protector and he would not fail to deliver on his promise. Through this event the descendants of Abraham were urged to learn the lesson that God provides and to trust in that provision.

Life is filled with these kinds of moments. Throughout this past summer I would speak with people about the return to public worship and I, for one, dreamed of what it would be like. I looked forward to the time when we would be together and the plans looked good. When the day finally came it was a joyous time for me, and I hope for you, but I can almost guarantee that some of you left a bit disappointed. It wasn't what you expected and perhaps it took some time to find that serenity. The same God who went before the nation of Israel goes before us. We no longer see the pillar of cloud or fire but His presence is still our guide. The Holy Spirit has been poured out as a gift for those who follow Jesus and with that gift comes, among other things, the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference.

St. Paul knew something of that serenity. In some ways life hadn't worked out exactly as Paul had thought it might. He did indeed travel to Rome as he often promised he would but I'm not sure he dreamed that it would happen while he was under arrest. While sitting in prison he wrote letters to those he had come to know during his missionary journeys. The congregation in Philippi was one of the recipients of a letter from a man who had every reason to be angry and bitter but instead the letter is known as the letter of joy. While not pretending that following Jesus will be all 'butterflies and sunshine' St. Paul highlights the need for disciples to keep their minds on the wonderful privilege of serving God. He sees the day of his death approaching and yet he yearns to remain in the body and help his friends find joy in the faith. There is a level of humility in St. Paul and a serenity in the midst of struggle that I find very compelling. The Spirit of God was truly working in and through Paul of Tarsus as the unexpected did not divert him from his task of encouraging and building up his brothers and

sisters in Christ.

And now we come to that pretty familiar story about the workers which often prompts people waiting in line at a Pot-Luck supper to quote “the last shall be first”. But what does that story have to say to us in the midst of this pandemic and under the theme of serenity? Let me remind you of the picture and perhaps the Holy Spirit will prompt something in you..

In the days of Jesus, particularly during harvest time, people would make themselves available for working in the field and various land owners would come to the market to find these workers and hire them for the day. They would then go into the fields to work alongside the land owner’s slaves and family to bring in the harvest. A very similar things is going on around the world today as migrant workers travel through regions during harvest time offering their labour to farmers. The usual practice was that the hiring would happen at first light but in Jesus’ parable there were a number of hirings. A coin called a ‘denarius’ was the norm for payment and so the workers hired at first light would have gone to work expecting a denarius at the end of the day. When it came time for the payment to be made something odd happened in that those who were hired later in the day received a full day’s pay - a denarius - and that is when a different kind of expectation began to grow in the minds of those who had been working all day. This was obviously a generous land owner since those who only worked for about an hour were getting a full day’s pay. This must mean, they concluded, that more than a day’s pay was in store for those who worked long hours. Of course we know that their new expectations were dashed when they received what they first expected - a denarius. The land owner was indeed generous just not in the way they expected. He was generous in hiring many workers in order to get the work done with many hands and he chose to treat those who had only worked for an hour as if they had worked all day. This was not the sort of generosity the workers were hoping for but it is the sort of generosity that was demonstrated. Rather than being happy for the short-term workers they were angry at the land owner. I believe that we can sometimes be like those first workers when we see someone else benefit even though we have exactly what we need. There was no serenity in those first workers but they were invited to allow that serenity to grow in them as they contemplated what to do about this unexpected turn of events. The display of generosity did not match their expectations and it threatened to make the fact that they had been given a full day’s pay something over which to cry rather than rejoice. Expectations can ruin a wonderful gift. The freedom experienced by the nation of Israel, the privilege of serving others in Christ’s name, or the fact of being hired and receiving a full day’s pay are all gifts that were threatened by incorrect expectations. It is better, in my opinion, to ask God to grant us serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference.