

Sermon – Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 21A)

Scripture Texts: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *God is able to provide for our needs, even bringing water out of the proverbial rocks to sustain us. Especially in times of conflict and division, we are called to hold on to this hope and to work for the good of all God's people.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. "...in humility, regard others as better than yourselves."
 - a. Paul's call for unity
 - i. In this letter, Paul is addressing the church in the town of Philippi, and he seems to be writing in part due to conflicts in the church. Those who read the book *Lydia* in our summer book group last year might remember some of that conflict.
 - ii. Today's passage is at the heart of the letter, and it opens with this passionate, heartfelt call to unity.
 - b. Unpacking "humility"
 - i. Paul's use of the word we translate as humility is striking. It is a compound word in Greek, ταπεινοφροσύνη (=tah-pay-no-fro-SOO-nay), putting together words commonly translated as "lowly" and "thinking / feeling."
 - ii. Part of what makes it so interesting is that scholars think Paul may have created this compound word! It's not seen in any other Greek writing prior to Paul's use.
 - iii. And, even more interestingly, when it starts to be used in other writing after Paul's use in this letter, it is most often used as an insult; in those uses, it might be translated as calling someone "pathetic" or "a bottom feeder".
 - c. Challenge of living into this call
 - i. This is a challenge for us – to follow Paul's instructions here can be costly, even a bit dangerous. Looking to the interests of others is right and proper in healthy community, but what about when there is conflict or division?
 - ii. I have sometimes seen people apply this in profoundly unhealthy ways, failing to exercise basic boundaries and self-care. Are we really to sacrifice ourselves and our well-being on behalf of others?
2. Water from the Rock
 - a. Israelites in the wilderness
 - i. We are continuing with the Israelites as they cross the desert after their exodus from Egypt. God brought them safely across the Red Sea, as we saw two weeks ago. And, as we saw last week, God provided food for them in the desert.
 - ii. However, this week, we meet a new problem – a lack of water. As you probably know, water is essential to life. The Israelites aren't just grumbling with discontent – they are experiencing real, life-threatening thirst. They know real fear for themselves, their children, and their livestock.

- iii. And, this need leads, pretty naturally, to quarrelling! Indeed, this is may be the unavoidable result of unmet needs! (As we are seeing in our world today!)
- b. God provides again
 - i. Thankfully, God does not condemn the people for a lack of faith, or for their complaining. Rather, God accepts their honesty and their fear, and comes among them with mercy and hope.
 - ii. If you were here last week, you heard my friend (Rev. Mitchell Felton) preach on God's provision of food. One of the things that stood out to me was that the people saw God when they looked toward the wilderness – not when they retreated from it.
 - iii. Similarly, when God hears the cry of the thirst people in this passage, God sends Moses further ahead of them, deeper into the wilderness. Again, that is where they find God.
 - iv. And what happens next is remarkable. Moses strikes the rock with is staff, as God instructs, and water pours forth from the rock, even though a desert rock is the last place where one would expect to find water.
 - v. God shows up in these moments of need! It is here that we can recognize our constant dependence on God's goodness.
- 3. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus"
 - a. This pattern of need and provision, of God showing up in the places where we most depend on God, not just a pretty object lesson – but a core part of the story that God seems to be telling all throughout creation.
 - b. Dawn's story
 - i. Financial challenges; maxed out financial aid and student loans, working many hours to try and meet the minimum payments required to stay in school
 - ii. Mercy and provision in the registrar's office (a rock if ever there was one!) – when going to ask for extra time during one particularly difficult semester, she was told that her balance had already been paid. It was a shock (and delight!), as a mysterious stranger had apparently come into the office and covered the debt for that semester.
 - iii. God opened a way where there seemed to be no way forward, providing for my friend's needs.
 - c. Mind of Christ
 - i. Philippians Christ Hymn – perhaps some of the earliest Christian liturgy!
 - ii. God doesn't just direct the story from the outside, but steps into the story.
 - iii. And, just when things seem darkest, as God – in Jesus – embraces humility to the point of death (even death on a cross!), the wonder working power of God shows up! God raises Jesus from the dead, highly exalting him, "so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God."
 - d. Our invitation into the story
 - i. This is the great story that we get to be a part of! We can embrace humility, putting others before ourselves, resisting quarrelling, because God is with us – because God is providing for our needs.
 - ii. This is something that I got to watch my friend, Dawn, do years later. As soon as she could afford it (but possibly before it was truly financially wise), she went back to the registrar's office at our old college with a large check and asked them to apply it

to the account of a student in need. Having received water from the rock, she got to be part of providing it for someone else!

- iii. And so, we are called to put on the mind of Christ, to consider others better than ourselves, to choose unity even when it means forgiving those who have offended us. God is with us, and when we are willing to find ourselves in this story, we will see God bring water from the rocks, unity from division, glory from the cross, and life from the tomb.

Amen.