

Journeying through the Revised Common Lectionary

Readings, Commentary, and Discussion Questions for October 1, 2017

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21

THE READINGS

First Reading: Exodus 17:1-7 *Alternate Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32*

¹ From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.”

Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?”

³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

⁵ The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”

Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Worth Noting: Almost everyone questions God's presence during a crisis. Jesus did it when he cried from the Cross “My God, My God: Why have you forsaken me?” In this episode from the Exodus from Egypt to Canaan, the people protest a lack of drinking water – that without which life cannot survive. How does your community react to crises?

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16 *Alternate: Psalm 25:1-9*

¹ Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

² I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,

³ things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.

⁴ We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD,
and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

¹² In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels in the land of Egypt,
in the fields of Zoan.

¹³ He divided the sea and let them pass through it,
and made the waters stand like a heap.

¹⁴ In the daytime he led them with a cloud,

- and all night long with a fiery light.
- ¹⁵ He split rocks open in the wilderness,
and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.
- ¹⁶ He made streams come out of the rock,
and caused waters to flow down like rivers.

Worth Noting: Everyone knows Psalm 119 is the longest. Know which is the second longest? Correct! Psalm 78. It stands in the exact middle of the Psalter (by total verses), and instructs later generations of the LORD's goodness to the Exodus generation. In hymns and songs does your community recall God's graciousness to previous generations?

Second Reading: Philippians 2:1-13

¹ If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

- ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.

- ⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

¹² Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Worth Noting: We read this, one of the most famous of Paul's writing, at least twice every liturgical year (which is why it may sound familiar). For the imperial forces in Philippi, it represented absolute foolishness: Who would bend a knee to and declare lord a Crucified One? Because of its familiarity,

has the bite, the sense that this is radically different from popular wisdom, gone out of the images?

Gospel: Matthew 21:23-32

²³ When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

²⁴ Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.”

²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.”

And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸ “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?”

They said, “The first.”

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

Worth Noting: In the debate between intention and deeds, Jesus and the Jerusalem authorities agree that it is deeds that count, not intention (assuming the second son was not just dissembling), as at Matthew 7:21: “‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” Have you found yourself at one time or another reluctantly, perhaps even slowly, doing what is right? Did it feel meritorious? Was it like exercising and dieting when you really didn’t want to do either?

CONNECTING WITH THE SCRIPTURES

Entering into the Scriptures

The Christ hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 describes the life of Jesus as a hero’s journey. Jesus begins in an exalted position (verse 6); in the faithful following of his calling (verses 7-8b), he suffers apparent destruction (verse 8c), but in the end, he receives the ultimate affirmation from God in a return to his exalted position (verses 9-11). For 2000 years, Christians have found these verses energizing and deeply illuminating. and scholars have found rich grounds for analysis and exegesis. In any analysis, one thing above everything else must be remembered: Philippians 2:6-11 is a hymn. If a hymn, then poetry; and if poetry, then not systematic theology and potentially productive of a myriad of interpretations. We approach the hymn as we would any poetry, open to multiple meanings.

For example, how should “form” (*morphē* in Greek) in verses 6 and 7 be understood? Philosophers used the term to refer to the true being, the unchanging reality of anything or

anyone. Less philosophically, artists used the term to refer to the outward appearance of something. Which was meant here?

Again, what does it mean that “Jesus emptied himself of equality with God”? Was Jesus of Nazareth no longer equal to God?

Or, who was Jesus’ master when he was a slave? The Father? His parents Mary and Joseph? The Roman occupiers of Palestine?

As we savor the richness of the poetry, such questions keep popping up. The answer to all of them just might be “Yes!” It is possible that the hymn plays on the various meanings of “form” so that it does not have exactly the same denotation in adjoining verses. If “form” is a visual expression, then Jesus may be said to have given up one form to take on the visual form of a slave. Then we have the precedent of God taking on all of the grief and desolation of the slave classes.

If every answer is “Yes!”, then Jesus was a slave to his Father, to Joseph and Mary, and to all of humanity. Service, service to the point of losing control of his own life – a fair definition of slavery – was the reason for the Incarnation.

When we engage the poetry of the earliest Church in this way, some of the possibilities support what Christians now hold as orthodox beliefs; others may be heretical. Connecting with the earliest Christians and their Scriptures fully, however, requires an openness to the workings of the Spirit in the historical community manifest in the halting words of believers. As the Apostle said, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; . . . now I know in part” (1 Corinthians 13:12; King James Version). Scriptures capture the process of clearing the glass and learning more fully.

“You Always Hurt the One You Love”

Ever notice how children can be angels in school and devils at home? One theory: children know where they are safe, where the adults won’t dispossess them, where they are confident of love. There, in that safe place, children feel free to act out, often to the annoyance of parents and siblings.

We are entering into a part of Matthew’s Gospel in which Jesus debates and challenges the Jerusalem authorities. The Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32) is the first of a triad of parables directed against “the synagogue across the street.” In this parable, the object lessons are brothers: The followers of Christ identify as brothers of nascent rabbinic Judaism. Like many estranged younger brothers, the Christ followers fight fiercely against their older sibling. Here, they use a pointed story against their own family. Elsewhere, they employ language much stronger than they might use against outsiders, the Greeks, Romans, and others who constituted the bulk of the population. After all, any similar attacks on the majority culture would be met by swift, sure, and harmful reprisals. It’s always safer to strike out at someone you know loves you – even your estranged brother.

Prompting Conversations

Does railing against God help you survive difficult situations? What does such railing say about your belief in God’s presence?

“Everything necessary for salvation can be found in Scripture. Not everything found

in Scripture, however, is necessary for salvation.” Does this aphorism apply to our analysis of poetic scriptures like the Psalms and Philippians 2:6-11? Is there a willingness to accept ambiguity in the Old Testament but not the New? Why?

Paul equates humble slavery with divinity. How does your community honor those who have served faithfully?



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