

Bible Study
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21, Year A
October 1, 2017

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

Exodus 17:1-7

Anyone who has been in a position of leadership can relate to Moses' dilemma in this passage. Acting on faith and with divine guidance, he is leading his people from slavery into the promised land. Moses might be tempted by the potential for personal power, but he never really gets a chance. Instead, he finds himself in a "don't shoot the messenger!" situation when there is a scarcity of water for his people. His people did what people do: they complained, they quarreled, and they turned on Moses. And Moses, in turn, sought the ear of the Lord in his frustration, asking, "What shall I do with this people?" As you might hear, the narrative becomes more about quarrelling and blame than it does about the vital, living water. The instruction Moses receives from the Lord isn't about managing the people, but about how to draw that life-giving water in abundance from a place of seeming scarcity. And, no surprise, at the source of this water is the Lord, "I will be standing there in front of you..." reminding us of God's eternal presence even in times when we are parched, quarrelsome, and doubtful.

- What are the quarrels and complaints that can keep us from experiencing the providential love of God?
- When have you noticed unexpected abundance, exactly when you needed it most? Where was God in that time?

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

In these sections of Psalm 78, the narrative from Exodus can be found woven into the larger life and context of the people of Israel. Psalm 78 is often characterized as a Covenant or Liturgical Psalm. Neither a lament nor a song of praise, these psalms were used to characterize the public worship of the people as a community of faith. This psalm recounts praise-worthy actions of divine intervention: freedom from oppression, splitting open the sea, leading by a cloud, splitting open the rocks to provide water. This ritual of remembering and recounting is a community-building act of worship. It is, perhaps, the exact opposite of selfish complaining because it draws attention to communal recognition of God, whose actions are greater than any of us individually could accomplish.

- What is the earliest story you remember hearing about God's providence for God's people from the Hebrew Scriptures? What stands out about these "Sunday School Stories" for us today?
- What are the actions of God toward the people of God that should be remembered and retold to our own children, and our children's children?

Philippians 2:1-13

"... be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."

There are many times in our contemporary lives when it seems like being of one mind is an impossible reality. Political and ideological differences pull us in different directions and fill our minds with sounds

bites of divisive rhetoric. And yet, the language of this Epistle to the Philippians tells us to be of the same mind, to have the same love and to do all of this because of the lavish and loving example set forth by Jesus Christ. It is sobering to read words written thousands of years ago and feel them still convicting our hearts and exhorting our actions about how to be Church in the world. At the core of the reminders of this Epistle are the virtues of humility and service. Or, in other words, “is it better to be *right*, or to be *kind*?” There are lessons in this Epistle for vestries, for church leaders, for our own devotional reflections. Jesus is our example: how do we find the humility to live into that example rather than succumbing to our own wants and needs?

- How does our Baptismal Covenant instruct us to act out of the same mind and the same love of Christ? Name examples of the way you have observed this lived out covenant in your lives both in the church and in the world.
- What are the areas where you struggle to be of the same mind and the same love as Christ and each other: as a person, as a parish, and/or as the Church? Name these areas, and consider ways to hold both the division and the possibility of reconciliation in Christ in your prayers.

Matthew 21:23-32

This Gospel lesson plays out almost like a theatrical scene: Jesus is met with a question and responds with a question which is lobbed around almost like a tennis ball among the officials and the people. With all the banter back and forth about how to answer the question and what that answer might imply, it quickly becomes clear that what was posed to Jesus as he approached was really more of a trap than an honest question. And so it is that Jesus uses a parable to further illustrate the folly of our attempts to please others (or God), which end up revealing our own lack of moral grounding. Jesus illustrates what we might call the “question behind the question” to strip away all of the pretense and break down the rhetoric around what one *should* say, in order to reveal one’s true intentions. The almost incomprehensible reality is that God doesn’t ask us to say and do what we think will please God. God asks us to come, humbly and honestly, exactly as we are with our hearts open to God’s transforming love.

- What are places in our lives where our lips are saying “yes” to God, but our actions are not following through? How can we align our yes-saying with our yes-doing?
- How can we ask questions of others with openness, inviting genuine conversation without expecting a particular response? How does this apply to our lives of prayer, and to our lives of Christian service?

Sarah Kye Price is a postulant for the priesthood in the Diocese of Virginia and Professor of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University. She is a third-year seminarian in the low-residency program at Church Divinity School of the Pacific, preparing for bi-vocational ministry.

Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. © 2017 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.