

Bible Study
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20, Year A
September 24, 2017

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

Exodus 16:2-15

Have you ever felt true physical hunger? The kind that creates a dull, aching delirium in which nothing matters other than finding nourishment? In the West, we are largely removed from this experience, and so it is difficult to fully inhabit the desperation of the hungry Israelites, wandering and woeful. And so we are equally removed from the intense, incarnate miracle of discovering God's *manna* in the wilderness.

There is a current in the story of God and God's people, one of hunger and fulfillment, that shows up again and again. In all cases, true nourishment comes from God, and not from the feeble machinations of humankind—think of Eden, of the Last Supper, of the Eucharist in which we partake. We can survive (for a time) on our own, but the true journey cannot be fulfilled without the abundance of God. We must feel that hunger in ourselves first before we can be fed.

- What gives you true nourishment? Where, other than in God, have you sought to feed the deep hunger within? How has that worked out for you?

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

This psalm, which extols the wonders of God's mercy and providence, is worth an introspective pause. The Psalmist praises God for what God has *done*, not what God thought or felt. God proves the existence of God's grace and mercy through action. To put a finer point on it, God did not simply send vague "thoughts and prayers" to the starving Israelites.

We live in a time of urgent need, both at home and around the world. More so than ever, through social media and mass communication, we are exposed to the wonders and horrors of our common experience as humans on this planet. If we are to walk as the people of God, we must show up in action, as God does, and not merely in a passive posture of sympathetic thoughts. This is not a matter of "earning salvation" or scoring points with a divine scorekeeper. It is simply that if we are called to "make [God's] deeds known among the peoples" then we need to embody that in our own deeds.

- How is your life representative of prayerful action? What might you do, right now, to more fully embody God's deeds of mercy and providence?

Philippians 1:21-30

Paul sets up an interesting dichotomy here: the choice between dying to "depart and be with Christ" or "striving side by side" with the Church on earth. This raises some challenging

questions: is being with Christ in another realm superior to living “in the flesh”? On which realm—the flesh or the spirit—should our focus lie?

Paul makes his choice: to stay and labor alongside the beloved community, even as it suffers. And, implicitly, we are called to the same decision. No matter how great our longing for personal union with Christ, we are here, now. No matter how broken this creation, we are part of it, now. Labor we must, and suffer we may, but in Christ, we find meaning—the Life at the heart of life.

- What do you want to do with your one, precious life before you die? How can you find Christ in the midst of your messy, earthly existence?

Matthew 20:1-16

Isn't there a part of you that feels indignant on behalf of the first laborers in this parable? After all, they put in a long day's work; they did what was expected of them; they played by the rules. And then these other people come along, work the bare minimum, and they profit off others' labor? It's not fair! Isn't God supposed to be just?

Isn't there a part of you that feels indignant on behalf of (or as one of) the working poor in this country? After all, you put in a long day's work; you did what was expected of you; you played by the rules. And then these other people come along, work the bare minimum, and they profit off your labor? It's not fair!

We should be careful not to make parables into cute little moral stories (ie. God rewards everyone equally, and isn't that so nice?) Maybe those tidy conclusions are true. Maybe. But also, maybe God isn't the generous landowner in this pericope. Maybe God is the silent question at the end of the story. Maybe the kingdom of God is our response of righteous anger to such an unfair schema. Maybe.

- Where do you see God in this parable? Look again; where else might God be?

Phil Hooper is a second year Master of Divinity student at Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, Ca., and a Postulant for Holy Orders from the Diocese of Nevada. A CDSP Bishop's Scholar and SIM Carpenter Merit Scholar, Phil is currently focused on the intersection of contemplative Christian spirituality, social action, and community building.

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