



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 20 (A)

Satisfaction

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

“I can’t get no satisfaction,” says Mick Jagger in his most famous song. That is exactly what our scriptures are about today. We have a passage from the Book of Exodus in which the Israelites are so unhappy and ungrateful that they actually wish out loud that God had allowed them to die enslaved in Israel. And we have the story from the Gospel of Matthew where the laborers who showed up at 9 a.m. are angry that the workers who only showed up at 5 p.m. get paid the same amount as themselves, who have worked all day in the hot sun.

To be fair and honest, they all have a case. The Israelites are lost in the desert and have no reason to expect that food and water will magically appear to save them. And it really doesn’t seem fair that nobody is rewarded according to how much they worked in the parable in Matthew.

Despite these instinctive misgivings, we like to believe we would somehow be far-seeing and obedient to God if we were in the same situation. We’d like to believe that if we were with the Israelites, we would be brave and have faith that God would take care of us. And we’re sure that if we were with the disciples hearing Jesus’ parable, we’d immediately understand that God’s grace is given freely to everyone regardless of how much effort they are able to put in, because we can’t earn our salvation anyway.

But the truth is that we are even less likely to either have faith in or be satisfied with God’s grace than the people in these two stories, and that stems largely from how very customizable our lives are today. We don’t have enough annoying strangers in our lives. Think about it. You can do your shopping online and don’t have to put up with irritating cashiers and customers. You can order restaurant delivery on DoorDash or UberEats and never deal with a waiter or other diners. In the age of streaming, long gone are the days of having to deal with a dopey clerk at the video store who knew nothing about and refused to stock the great movies you love.

Not only can we avoid almost all annoying strangers, but we also don’t have enough annoying friends. Our grandparents were friends with their next-door neighbors and the people in their town because that was who they had access to, whether they had anything in common or not. Today? Don’t like your neighbors? You never have to talk to them. If you don’t like actual people at all, you don’t have to deal with them.

You can escape into an online bubble of like-minded folks or even just watch TV catered specifically to your political tastes and entertainment interests.

But as writer David Wong writes in *7 Reasons the 21st-Century is Making You Miserable*, “The problem is that peacefully dealing with incompatible people is crucial to living in a society. In fact, if you think about it, peacefully dealing with people you can't stand *is* society. Just people with opposite tastes and conflicting personalities sharing space and cooperating, often through gritted teeth.” So in our modern world of technology, staring at our screens of various sizes 24/7, we impose a great deal of isolation on ourselves. And that weakens our skills in dealing with irritating people and making it through that phase of not being able to stand each other and surprising ourselves by becoming friends.

Now, lest this sermon degenerate into a “kids these days” rant, let’s take a step back and remember that the people in our scripture stories were displaying the exact same tendencies we have today, that are so true to human nature. But this is the terrifying part: If our 21st-century world is driving us in ever more effective ways to be isolated and less able to build real human relationships, how can we expect to have a real relationship with God?

Remember the catchphrase of the Evangelical churches? Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? It’s a valid question, now more than ever. In the same way that it’s both tempting and easy to construct a façade of ourselves that never gets pierced by reality because we can hold everyone at bay through technology, it’s equally tempting to think we can pull the same move with God. It’s easy to assume if we’re not careful that the shiny happy person we present to the world, we can present to God. And in the same way that we just cancel out of our lives people we find annoying, we can do the same to God when we find God annoying.

And boy, is that easy to want to do in our scriptures today. Many of us are frankly miffed that the people in Jesus’ parable who showed up at 5 p.m. get a full day’s wages. But the answer is not to wall ourselves off and ignore God, which isn’t really possible anyway. The answer lies back with the Israelites, the original cranky complainers.

Moses says to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’”

Draw *near* to the Lord when you don’t like what the Lord is doing, don’t run away.

What is true for our human relationships is true for our relationship with the Divine: Running away and hiding never got anyone anywhere. Get up close to God and hash out your problems. Spend some time in prayer and present a detailed list of what you’re unhappy with and why. You don’t have to fear honesty with God any more than honesty with your friends and family. We’re the only ones who can break the cycle of false, engineered reality and engage in true relationships. Our modern conveniences will never force us to do the hard work of love.

But we have an incredible blessing to counter the seductive isolation and self-centeredness that threaten our ability to live honestly: We have the church. Church is one of the very last things in modern life that we can't customize. There is no such thing as iChurch. You cannot pull up a "settings" menu on the Body of Christ and choose how and when you want to interact with it, to silence it, to put it on vibrate mode or sport mode or "no painfully transformative experiences" mode. Life in Christian community is as raw and as real as it gets and may be our last link to the raw reality of our true selves and our true God.

Our scripture continues: "And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. The LORD spoke to Moses and said, 'I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'"

Because that is what is at the heart of our dissatisfaction: fear. We isolate ourselves and present a false front to the world because we think that no one, especially no one as perfect as God, could love us as we truly are. But God gives us the ultimate reassurance in this story today. The Israelites have just outed themselves as ungrateful, cranky, and severely lacking in faith. But God provides for their needs and answers the question they are too afraid to speak aloud: Can you love us?

God's answer is: "Yes. I can, I do, and I will, no matter what."

The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice (she/her/hers) is an Episcopal priest who serves as the Canon for Evangelism & Discipleship Development for the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri. She is a graduate of Yale Divinity School, where she won the Yale University Charles S. Mersick Prize for Public Address and Preaching and the Yale University E. William Muehl Award for Excellence in Preaching. She has taught undergraduate courses at the University of Indianapolis and has contributed to *Lectionary Homiletics*, the *Young Clergy Women's Project* journal *Fidelia's Sisters*, and other publications. She has served as a researcher and community ministry grant consultant for the Indianapolis Center for Congregations and is currently a member of The Episcopal Church's Evangelism Council of Advice. A communicator of the gospel at heart, she writes and teaches on a wide variety of topics, including rethinking evangelism, stewardship, leadership, women's theology of the body, mysticism, and spiritual development. When she's not thinking about theology, particularly the intersection of evangelism and justice work (which is all the time, seriously), you'll find her swing dancing. Find more of her work at her website *Roof Crashers & Hem Grabbers* (www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com).