

The 16th Sun after Pentecost, Proper 20 "Security in Christ Alone"

Ex 16.2-15; Phil 1:21-30; Matt 20:1-16, Ps 105

We humans have one thing in common and that is that we do not like uncertainty. Given the choice, we generally prefer the familiar over the unfamiliar. We draw some primal comfort knowing that we can rely on certain things. It's a bit like the feeling you may get when you walk into St. Thomas on Sunday morning and feel relieved to see that the pews haven't been rearranged. Ordinarily, you probably don't even have to think about where you will sit. Normally, you can just drift in on autopilot to the same place you always sit. However, in our up-ended, socially-distanced world of COVID-19 the normal is not so normal and our pew-seating arrangements have changed!

So, what happens when life takes us into unfamiliar territory like a COVID Pandemic? That's when we discover that: we cannot always depend on the security of yesterday to get us through the challenges of today. The Hebrews learned that hard lesson as they meandered through the desert on their way to the Promised Land.

After miraculously escaping death in Egypt, the Hebrews found themselves wandering through the wilderness and running low on food. That's when the complaining started. The emptier their stomachs, the more they began to think that: "perhaps things weren't so bad in Egypt, after all."

However, memories can be tricky things. When we get caught-up in circumstances that are less than ideal, our memories can have a way of betraying our own best interests. Sometimes, when we look at the past, we see only what we want to see, rather than the reality that was. The problem with engaging in such enterprises is that it invariably clouds our judgment.

In times of great anxiety and uncertainty, people often long for "the good old days." But, when we get to the heart of the matter, I suspect that for most of us, it's not so much a desire to a return to the way things used to be as much as it is a desire to recapture a sense of "normalcy amidst the anxiety and uncertainty of the moment.

And, as we can discern from today's readings, the anxiety of uncertainty quickly leads to complaining and a lack of trust. This is precisely what happened in the wilderness when the Hebrew's faith in God wavered, and they lost confidence in the leadership of Moses and Aaron.

So, to resolve the anxiety and emptiness they were experiencing, the Hebrews started looking to the past for answers. The way they saw it, it came down to one of two choices: they could return to life in Egypt, the normalcy of the good old days where at least they knew where their next meal was coming from, albeit with strings attached. Or, they could trust in God to deliver on a promised future they had yet to realize. In essence, were they willing to exchange their future for the past? Exchange their uncertain freedom for the normalcy of tyranny?

Now, that kind of transactional mindset might work in Egypt, where you might be just one meal away from becoming someone's slave, but it does not work in the Promised Land. In the Promised Land, God's graciousness is sufficient to fill every need.

Ah, but the haunting Siren's Song of normalcy in Egypt! Yet, as I heard someone once say, "Egypt" is not just a place in Africa. "Egypt" is also that familiar place within us!.... that place

where we also can rationalize our freedom away. We rationalize our freedom away in exchange for a temporary reprieve from the anxious, empty feeling that uncertainty can cause anyone to experience from time to time. That place where we forget God's unfailing grace and love, under the fearsome, unsettling uncertainty of the now.

Sadly, in our land of plenty, many of us are all too willing to settle for much less than God is offering. When we become accustomed to having too much of a good thing, it becomes easy to take God's love and graciousness for granted. This is especially true when we live in a western society, where abundance is often the norm.

In a perverse way, abundance can become a form of slavery. Just take a look at what happened in Jesus' parable. Day laborers who were hired first and paid last were indignant that the landowner paid the same wages to laborers who had worked fewer hours. They clearly felt cheated. Their expectations had enslaved them into a sense of entitlement. It never occurred to them that the landowner paid them last on purpose ...perhaps... so that they could see first-hand what gracious generosity really looks like. The truth is, when consumed by the fear of: "not getting enough" or "having enough," we can no longer see God's graciousness at work in our lives. In those times, we become more inclined to look back toward "Egypt" to satisfy our emptiness or to calm our anxiety.

Ah, but those few who live as if everything is a gracious gift from God – yes! even the uncertainty of a pandemic, for those who are grateful for every morsel of life, they know from experience that we cannot depend on the security of yesterday to get us through the anxieties and challenges of today.

Love, God's abundant, gracious Love is the only thing that can carry us safely through the anxieties and challenges of today. Those who enjoy life in its fullest measure are the ones who never look back to Egypt, but who put their trust in God. They are grateful for what they have... not what for what they think they have earned. These are the faithful ones whose lives are consumed with the security and abundance of God's love.

For they are the ones who are: "*living their lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...standing firm in one spirit...and in no way intimidated by [adversity].*" [Phil 1:27-28] because, "God in Christ Jesus" is the only "Egypt" they will ever need.

"Search for the LORD and his strength; continually seek his face." Ps 105:4

What are the implications and meanings for you in today's readings?

1. Kris Kristofferson once wrote the lyrics: "*Looking back and longing for the freedom of my chains.*"
 - a. What are the "Chains" or the "Egypt's" in your life?
 - b. Why do you think the landowner paid the laborers who only worked one hour, the same as those who worked all day?
 - c. Why do you think the landowner paid the last first? What would you have done?