

September 21, 2008

19th Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 20a (Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

WITHOUT REFERENCE TO OTHERS

It is one of those divine and delicious ironies to be confronted with a difficult parable of the divine economy in a week where the economies of the world have been in turmoil. I know that there are some of you affected quite directly and others less so but I imagine that all of us will be touched one way or another by extraordinary bank failures and fluctuating stock markets. I want to come back to the anxiety that seems to be engendered by what our President has rightly called 'unprecedented' circumstance, but to do so by way of thinking about how we learn who we are and so discover the challenge and gift for us in one of Jesus' hardest parables.

We learn a lot about who we are in life by learning who we are not. We learn in some sense by being 'over-against' others. You know how this works: "All my friends are allowed to...--fill in the blank here--... watch television, have body piercings or tattoos, stay up past midnight... whatever it is --- and the reply comes "Even if that is true, that is not what we do in our family." We learn something about what we like and what we don't like by comparing and contrasting ourselves to others and as often as not we are not even conscious of making the comparison. So-and-so seems intelligent, successful, admired in the world and attractive to others and suddenly I find myself wanting a darker suit or a power tie or a larger salary or whatever. It is a small step from this kind of imitative desire to knowing where it is that we belong or from where we are excluded.

I spent some of this week with a group of parish pastors with whom I have been meeting for just over four years now. What we have in common is an interest in reading and talking about theology. I remember on our first meeting when we decided that we were all card carrying nerds by confessing that at one time or another every one of us had taken theology to the beach. This group is the smartest group of people of which I have ever been a part. I think back on those first meetings in which we were checking each other out and defining ourselves. 'He's pretty conservative.' 'She has a lot going on in her life' 'What exactly is a Mennonite anyway?' I distinctly remember wondering if I was going to be able to hold my own amongst all these PhDs, some of whom had been published. I knew I was having fun but was not sure if there was a place for my kind of relational theology amongst what seemed to be a confessional group. Once I was a little stung to find Anglicans lumped in with all the other 'Liberal Protestants'. Fairly quickly a couple of people dropped out, deciding that this was not the group for them for one reason or another. Looking back, I wonder if the reasons given were the real ones or whether there was some sense in which they felt as though they were being run off as the norms of the group took shape and as they found that they did not like them. In contrast, our recent meetings have had none of that kind of over-againstness as we have really relaxed into each other's company. We each appear to enjoy the others' unique

contribution to our conversations about what God is doing in our lives and in the world. We came together around a common task and found that a real caring has developed across all kinds of otherwise intractable religious boundaries.

Jesus' parable of the Kingdom holds out the same kind of promise -- the promise of being able to relax, the promise of freedom from anxiety, the promise of knowing ourselves loved and the promise of gifts that transcend all those distinctions and boundaries that we set up that lead us to live in fear.

If we are going to be able to hear the promise we must first acknowledge that there is a level on which we find the Kingdom portrayed in the parable to be unattractive. Many of us (but by no means all of us) are people to whom this world has been quite good with respect to money. We have done well in a world where our contributions are valued and we have been able to advance and to thrive. We have been able to provide rich experiences for our children, to offer hospitality to others, and all that comes from working hard and being well remunerated. Jesus' parable seems downright unfair and unjust, as though the owner of the vineyard is playing a game. Sure he can be generous to anyone he wants, so why do I feel as though I am getting a raw deal if I work all day and get only what is coming to me? Why does that seem unfair? Why do I feel as though I am somehow being devalued? Is it possible that I only feel that way because I am comparing myself to others? When I find myself like those people who worked all day, I think I am allowing my value and identity in this world to be governed by how I am doing *in relation to* others. As we know, however necessary it is for our development that we compare and contrast ourselves to others, there is a sense in which putting on Christ or living into the promises of the Gospel means finding our desires re-ordered and our identity increasingly dependent on God alone. That is the path of spiritual maturity and taking it is a way to finding ourselves freed from anxiety and freed to trust God like the wanderers in the wilderness who were fed with bread and quail in abundance even when things seemed really bad. As we can live without reference to others for our identity and value, then we have the possibility of real love -- relationship that transcends the barriers and resentments we create by our distinctions.

The turmoil of the financial services industry and its effect on the stock market make a serious and immediate difference in the lives of those who lose their jobs. They will need to regroup and they will probably need help and support while they do it. Others know disappointment as deals in which a lot of time has been invested fall thorough and credit dries up for now. These disappointments are real and there will be some time of grieving for some among us. But none of us need to fall prey to that generalized anxiety that comes when life seems to be unfair. We have a choice and that is to consider wherein lies our true worth and value and what makes for real achievement and real and right relationship in Christ. Isn't that the import of our parable? As the owner of the vineyard asks, "Are you envious because I am generous?" We only miss the generosity bestowed upon us when we are living with one eye on the other. That is the path of misery. The alternative is to keep our eyes on God and God's grace in our lives. That is the path of freedom.

Let us respond to the gospel in our customary time of silence recognizing that we are blessed without reference to others. Let us pray....