

Welcome to Autumn! Welcome to Fall! Whichever word you use and/or prefer it means the same thing – summer is well past and a new season has arrived. And indeed it is an exciting period in the year with so many changes occurring as we move steadfastly towards winter, Advent and the Christmas season.

Yesterday I drove guests from Toronto across the County to the Glenore Ferry. What a glorious day to be on the water – strong sunshine, rippling water, fresh smell of clean air and a panorama of the beauty of the County. As I drove, the famous song rang in my head – who could ask for anything more!

However, though each person exclaimed about the beauty around us, we all quietly mentioned the changing colours of the leaves heralding fall and the approach of winter. Canadians live with weather markers and the wonderful colours of leaves turning red and gold all around the lake certainly provided markers all pointing to colder weather ahead.

As you are aware, any journey offers possibilities of new vistas and experiences. We read in Exodus today such an experience for the Hebrews who followed Moses and Aaron out of the slavery of Egypt into the desert journey ahead to the promise land.

Think about it: is the passage we read full of the sound of happy, thankful Hebrews praising God for his wondrous work which led to their freedom? There are sound notes for sure but they are sounds of a people whining about the conditions in the desert, wistfully thinking of the warmth of the familiar places in Egypt. They reminisced about sitting by the fleshpots and eating bread until they were full. Here fleshpots speak of meat boiling on the stove while sending out wonderful aromas of good things to follow.

“Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt – you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill the whole assembly with hunger.” The people deplore the absence of fruit and water in the desert. Death by the hand of God refers in all probability to death from natural causes in contrast to the rigours of the desert. The people have clearly lost faith in God’s leadership and therefore they denounce Moses and Aaron who represent this so called all powerful God.

Moses is saddened by the volatility of the people who are working themselves up to a near rebellion. Wait, Moses would say, wait. God has heard your murmurings of complaint and plans to once again rescue you from this dire situation. Moses also cautions the people that their words, though leveled against Moses and Aaron, are really leveled at God. Be careful of what you say and do! You may have to live with the consequences of your complaints.

Then Moses speaks of the manna which God will provide, the white sticky substance which can sustain life in a desert. Some background historical information about manna: a sweet, sticky, honeylike juice exudes in heavy drops in May or June from a shrub found in the desert near where these people were wandering.

It melts in the heat of the sun, after falling on earth in grains. It has the flavour of honey. It is the natural juice of the shrub, but the Arabs believed that it fell from heaven with the dew. This was something completely new which the Hebrews had not seen before. Some suggest that the word manna is derived from Hebrew “man hu” meaning What is it? In other words, it is a sound alike word. Perhaps you know the story of the derivation of the word “sirloin” from King Henry 8<sup>th</sup> who was once so pleased with a loin of beef that he knighted it on the spot as “sirloin”. From this expression What is it? came the similar sounding word manna.

Manna became available and the people ate. Then they complained about the lack of meat and God sent flocks of quails so they might once again eat meat. Verse 12 has God saying: “I have heard the murmurings of the people of Israel; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”

God had to work hard through Moses and Aaron to get a word of praise out of this bunch. Once again God came through albeit in ways the Hebrews never expected and answered their cries for basic needs. You can hear the exasperation in God’s voice in this account in Exodus. What does it take to convince these people that I am the powerful God; I take care of my people; I provide the necessary ingredients to lead my people to true freedom and happiness. What does it take to make them thankful and full of praise for all I have done for them?

For a period of time the people stopped grumbling though Moses knew only too well that men and women soon forget and fall away too quickly from their God and neglect their acts of praise. Moses knew he was personally in for a hard time with these his people until he brought them into the new land whenever God led them to it. Moses was not looking forward to the journey.

When is enough enough? When do we raise our voices in praise? When do we acknowledge God’s redeeming love and his grace in our lives? Can we say we are a thankful people, overwhelmed by God’s grace and forgiving love? Or rather are we a quarrelsome , unhappy, whining lot more times than we wish to admit? When truly are we content?

Like the Hebrews of Moses’ day, we slip into the negative mode more often than not.

Our New Testament Gospel reading today speaks to another of the parables of Jesus. You know the story only too well: here we have a vineyard owner searching for men to work in his fields. He hires some early morning, others mid-morning, others early afternoon and some others in late afternoon. When time came at the day’s end for payment for their labour, the men were astounded when the man paid them all the same amount. Hey there, some of them shouted, this is hardly fair! We worked the hardest and yet the late arrivers got the same payment. What gives?

The owner states: what is it that is so unfair? I have paid each of you the amount I promised. Can I not do what I wish with my money? You all agreed with the pay initially and now you are all unhappy. Do you begrudge the fact that I am generous? You should celebrate my generosity.

Interesting passages to put together in this morning's assigned readings, are they not? The stories clearly speak to God's generosity and care for all men and women. It also speaks to the human condition of complaining, whining and jealousy and our worry that someone got more than they deserve or we received less than we deserve.

Jesus message was that the love of God and the availability of God's forgiveness were to all humans wherever they may abide. God was not so interested in when you came to give your life to him in thankfulness so much as the fact that you did give your life to him. Christians, being human themselves, sometimes resent the fact that God is willing to forgive one who asks for such forgiveness so late in their life or after committing a terrible act of violence against another.

What is it to you? Jesus proclaims. What is it to you if God is generous, if God is forgiving, if God is excited about a sinner who has come home after so many years and so many acts of defiance? Why do you resent this act of love? How has it hurt you? You have known God and walked with him for many years and have known the joy which comes from this. Are you resentful that God offers this to everyone, even those we despise and write off as evil and totally beyond the pale?

St. Paul in his letters to the new churches he had founded or to key Christians who had worked closely with him had to deal with these resentments among church members. Be a welcoming community – open the possibility of new life in God's forgiving love to everyone. Learn from one another and your faith will be enriched and enhanced through the experience of others who share their story of God's extraordinary generosity in their lives. Be excited by that, join in the joy and wonder of God's acts of mercy and open your heart to welcome others to the knowledge of God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus in the parable is warning his disciple and all of us: you received great blessing by coming into the Christian church early, indeed right at the beginning. However, do not claim special honour, for all men and women, no matter when they come, are equally precious to God. Is there not great comfort in this parable? It proclaims that no matter when we return to God, we are all equally dear to him and receive God's assurance of pardon and love..

Can we not cheer and give thanks for the great compassion of God? Can we not celebrate the great generosity of God? In the parable, the men did not all do the same work but they received the same pay. Perhaps we have two lessons here: The first lesson is that all service ranks the same with God. It is not the amount of service but the love in which it is given that counts.

The second lesson perhaps is even greater: all God gives is of grace for we can not earn what God gives us; we cannot deserve it; what God gives to us is from the goodness of God's heart; what God gives is not pay, but a gift; not a reward, but a grace. (Wm. Barclay).

Really, the key lesson I think is the importance of the spirit with which we work whether for pay or the work we do as volunteers in our community or our community of faith, our church. When we do something because we want to or because we feel responsible for a commitment we have made, then we need to do our best for the joy of it.

Most of us can remember the time when we made the personal commitment to become a member of the church. At Friendship this morning, we welcome Ray Brickell who has decided to become a member of the congregation. Where we worship is not as important as the finding of a community of faith in which we feel accepted and loved, a community where we can risk and learn and express ourselves, where we can ask questions and where we can contribute to the faith journey of others.

Barclay tells us that a man or woman is not a Christian if his or her first concern is pay. You remember Peter asked: "What do we get out of it?" The Christian works for the joy of serving God and his fellow man and woman. It is the paradox of the Christian life that he or she who aims at reward loses it, and he or she who forgets reward finds it.

Hello God! Can you not see that we are hungry and thirsty? Where are you shouted the Hebrews as they wandered in the desert. What do you expect us to do? Where are you?

Hello, I am here; do you even know I am here waiting for you? Come and I will give you life.

Have we not felt the same way as the Hebrews? Where are you God? You feel so far away.

Jesus by his very presence, his ministry, his death and his resurrection assured us of God's ongoing presence. You are never alone he proclaims even today. God is with you now and always, even to the end of time.

Our message today is not only that God loves us unconditionally, but that we in turn must be as open and forgiving, as welcoming of newcomers and new seekers in the faith, always prepared to be hospitable and excited to others who are growing in the faith. Our congregations must be welcoming, for we must be willing to invite others into the fellowship of faith which is so important to us all.

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