

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 23
Year A

Are We Ready to Choose?

[RCL] Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

The gospel for today begs allegory and analogy, leading inevitably to dividing people into groups of good and bad. It is an invitation to play the Blame Game. Coupled with our innate curiosity, like Pandora, we cannot help but want to know just who is going to be bound hand and foot and cast into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth! I suspect that as we hear this read, we all have candidates that leap to mind. It is the rare person who may reflect on why he or she might be that unlucky soul whose only sin appears to be not making the acceptable fashion statement for the occasion.

No matter how one parses this particular parable in Matthew, the results are baffling at best. Particularly in light of the fact that, at the end of the day, it simply means to express how passionately our God wants us to come to his banquet - how passionately our God wants us to come home - how passionately our God loves us - all of us - all of the time. Many are called, says our Lord, but few are chosen. What remains mysteriously hidden and unsaid here is that it is we who do the choosing. Few choose to return to God, too busy are they wasting time on inconsequential disputes over what is right and what is wrong.

Which message is also at the heart of Paul's correspondence with the Christ-followers in Philippi. He returns to the theme with which he began: there is no time for bickering, and no time to contemplate retribution against those who imprison me and those who hate us. There is simply no time for anything but the Love of God in Christ Jesus crucified and raised from the dead.

So please, get these two magnificent women, women who have struggled with me to proclaim the good news, get them back together again. Once you reconcile them you can rejoice! "And again I will say, Rejoice! The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything. Then you can get on with the business at hand: spreading the Good News of Christ crucified and raised from the dead."

Paul is in prison and he believes this is the only way to be: joyful in the Lord. Be joyful in the Lord all you lands! Jubilate Deo! "And the Peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus...Keep doing the things that you have learned and received...and the God of Peace will be with you."

Just what "things" have the Philippians learned? When Paul left Macedonia, he issued an invitation to the churches he knew to enter into partnership with him - a partnership of money

and ministry. It was to be a partnership of giving and receiving. It is in giving with Christ that we receive, it is in dying with Christ that we live. Christ, who did not consider equality with God something to be exploited, emptied himself, and invites us to do the same. Of all the churches with which Paul was associated - Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, Colossae, Galatia, Ephesus, and Philippi - it was only the Philippians who responded to his invitation. It was only the Philippians who sent Paul help, sending one of their own, Epaphroditus, who nearly died while serving Paul in prison.

Paul is the first pastoral counselor. He is sending them encouragement in hard times. He reminds the Philippians that they know what to do and how to do it. He has personally benefitted from their faithfulness in Christ Jesus. They have sacrificed money and gifts and nearly one of their own to further the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ - that God is at home and it is we who need to return to his banquet hall, fully prepared to do the work God calls us to do in Christ Jesus.

Paul's gift to us is the realization that the Church of Jesus Christ goes way beyond any single person or congregation. It is a vast network of congregations and peoples working together, sacrificing for one another, supporting one another.

But it is we who want to be left alone by the God who has made the most inconvenient men and women our neighbors - and instructed us to love them as much as we love God and love ourselves!

Against this backdrop, writes Paul, there is simply no time for division and argument. And there is no way to go it alone. Stop the dissension and disagreement right now. Disengage from worldly concerns and engage yourselves in God's work – “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches.”

In J.R.R. Tolkien's final book of *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam Gamgee, an uncommonly courageous little Hobbit, wakes up after the climactic battle. Thinking everything is lost, he discovers all his friends are around him. He cries out to Gandalf the great wizard, "I thought you were dead. But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue?"

Is everything sad going to come untrue? For those of us who believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's answer is a resounding, “Yes!”

Many are called, says our Lord Jesus, but few are chosen. It is we who do the choosing. Are we ready to choose? Are we ready to choose to keep doing the things that we have learned and received? Are we ready to move on and leave controversy behind us?

For if we are, the God of Peace shall be with us wherever we are, wherever we go. And everything sad will come untrue. Because our God passionately wants us to come to his banquet. And our God passionately wants us to come home. And our God will passionately supply every need, including finding us a new home in Christ Jesus. Our God will make sure that everything sad will come untrue.

So, it is that even from a prison cell, Saint Paul urges us to Rejoice!

And again I will say, Rejoice!

The Lord is near.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus every step of the way!

Amen.

Written by the Reverend Kirk Alan Kubicek. Ordained in the Diocese of Chicago in 1983, I served as a parish priest in the dioceses of Chicago, Connecticut and Maryland. After nearly 18 years as rector of St. Peter's in Ellicott City, MD, I spent six years as Chaplain and teacher at St. Timothy's School for Girls, an Episcopal and international boarding and day-school in Stevenson, MD. In the mid-1980's I was trained to work as a Stewardship Consultant through the Office of Stewardship at the Episcopal Church Center. I also helped to lead retreats for the Ministry of Money, a ministry of the Church of the Saviour, Washington, DC. Recently retired from full-time parish ministry, I do Interim and Supply work throughout the Diocese of Maryland. I also continue a lifetime as a drummer in various rock and jazz bands, currently playing with On The Bus, a Grateful Dead tribute band centered in the greater DC Metro region. I also use guitar and write music to supplement worship and the preaching event. Some of these songs can be seen on Youtube at www.youtube.com/user/SoundsDivine1. My sermons are archived at www.perechief.blogspot.com, and I have been writing for Sermons that Work for as long as I can remember! Feel free to contact me at kkub@aol.com.

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