

Sermon for Sunday, September 28, 2008

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)

By Tim Ljunggren

First Lesson	Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm	Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16
Second Lesson	Philippians 2:1-13
Gospel	Matthew 21:23-32

Who's responsible?

We hear that question frequently, don't we? Rather than being a question of concern, it usually turns out to be a question of condemnation. Who's responsible? Who can I point fingers at? Who can I blame? Who can I hold responsible?

The people of Israel were certainly asking that question in today's first lesson from Exodus, weren't they? From the wilderness of Sin, we can still hear their cry: "Who is responsible? There's no water to drink." Ultimately, the Israelites blame Moses for the dilemma, and hold him responsible: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

In response, God tells Moses to "go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink."

Moses, of course, does what God asks him to do and, lo and behold, water springs forth from the rock, just as God said it would. The Israelites are calmed for the moment, but Moses makes it a point to call the place of the miracle Massah and Meribah, "because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'"

Who's responsible?

Is the Lord among us or not?

Who can we blame?

The blame game is something that we all do very, very well, isn't it? Rather than question our own motives and agendas, we would much rather point fingers and ask the question, "Who's responsible?" rather than take on responsibility for ourselves.

It's just so much more fun that way, isn't it?

The Lord speaks to us this morning with welcoming words: "I am a God of compassion. I provide for my people. I do not blame the sins of the ancestors on the children. Each generation is shaped by their own choices—by their own willingness to take on responsibility for loving me and acknowledging my presence in their lives."

Yet, those welcoming words become critiquing words as well: "I am a God of justice. I hold all persons accountable for their own actions. Don't try to blame others for your own sins; take responsibility for your life and its direction. There is no evasion for each person's struggle to live faithfully. People are not as guiltless as they claim or imagine."

Welcoming words.

Critiquing words.

Imperative words.

How many times have we railed against another for not doing what we think they should do? How many times have we remained silent in the face of gossip? How many times have we stepped back from our responsibility to God, thinking that it's time that someone else steps up to the plate?

As long as we are alive, our work with God is never done. As long as we allow ourselves to acknowledge ourselves as Christians—as a community of faith—our responsibilities never end, both to God and to each other. To blame someone else, to point fingers, to ask the question "Who's responsible?" is to admit that we feel powerless or admit that we refuse to use our power in the name of God.

How do we hold ourselves responsible? What enables us to repent of those things that separate us from others and from God? Who or what will help us respond to those imperative words to turn and live?

What do you think?

Jesus tells us a story today, a story about a man with two sons. And all of us gathered here this morning are just like those two sons, aren't we? Just like the one son, there are times when we say "yes, God, I'll take responsibility for my own life," and yet do not. And there are other times when, just like the other son mentioned in Jesus' parable, when we refuse to take responsibility for ourselves, yet find the means to obey anyway. It's Jesus Christ who "being in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but gave it up, taking the form of a servant. ...And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." In Christ alone do profession and practice meet and match. In Christ alone do we fully understand the nature of responsibility.

And it's in baptism, and the reminder of that baptism, that you and I take on Christ. Clothed with Christ, we take on the possibility of a new heart and spirit. Dying and rising with Christ in those baptismal waters, we hear the imperative words become—and continue to become—welcoming words.

Who's responsible?

We are.
We always are.

Who can repent and live?

We can.

We always can.

Amen.

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