

‘Who Wants to be First?’
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
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based on Exodus 17:1-7 and Matthew 21:23-32

Please pray with me:

Loving God, create in us a clean heart; purge our souls with hyssop; gather us together as a mother hen who shelters her chicks. Grant us wisdom and gift us with your peace. Amen.

Who wants to be first? We are conditioned to want to be at the top of the heap; first in line; the mostly highly prized. But Jesus challenges us today to reconsider what “being first” means to God.

Today’s reading from Exodus begins by placing the Israelites in a particular place on their spiritual journey. They are in a “wilderness of Sin ...” Sin defined as separation from God ... and so the ‘wilderness of sin’ would be a place of isolation and hopelessness.

The wandering Israelites were not only feeling isolated and hopeless ... they were thirsty. Their sense of connectedness to God’s providence had dried out.

As the story goes, God gives Moses instructions about what to do and in the end, the people drink their fill and are satisfied. Out of a rock flowed a spring of flowing water that saved the thirsty Israelites from dying of thirst and renewing their trust in God.

Water here is a metaphor for God’s truth and the Israelites were no longer in a wilderness of sin when they were able to drink deeply of God’s truth and return to a relationship of trust.

Today’s Gospel lesson has a similar message.

The chief priests and elders of the people confront Jesus with a question: “By what authority are you doing these things (healing people, forgiving sins), and who gave you this authority?”

Jesus puts them to the test and tells them a brief parable about a man who had two sons and asks each to go and work in the vineyard.

One said, “I will not go”, but later changes his mind and goes. The other son says “I will go”, but doesn’t.

Which son does the will of the father?

The first son eventually did what he was told after disrespecting his father; the second son just flat out lied.

The chief priests and the elders answered correctly: they said the first son did the will of the father. But in their answer they revealed their own sin of isolation from God’s truth because they were, in life, the second son.

They had heard the call from John the Baptist to repent and be baptized; they claimed to be faithful; but in the end did not go into the vineyard.

Whereas the tax collectors and prostitutes who heard the call, repented, and trusted God enough to enter the vineyard were the ones Jesus said would be first into the kingdom of heaven.

Which son are we? How well do we live as though we trust God?

Carl Holladay reflects on this parable and offers this interpretation:

“The parable says that responses to God are of two kinds: that of the person who has said no, but who repents and whose life says yes; and that of the person who says yes, but whose

life says no.”

Trusting God isn't blindly accepting our fate, but about living a life worthy of our calling.

We respond to God's call to work in the vineyard when we help others; when we share our faith; when we study and pray and worship together.

That means letting go of our own will (if we're wandering around in a wilderness of sin) in favor of God's will.

A robust faith requires two things: repentance and forgiveness. Once we are (an old fashioned way to say this is) 'cleansed of sin' by naming our sins and asking for forgiveness ... we are nourished by springs of living water.

Connecting our words of promise with our deeds of goodwill the way we answer God's call and work in the vineyard.

Last week many people demonstrated their words and deeds matched by providing supplies and materials for UMCOR Cleaning Kits ... or Flood Buckets. It was an amazing accomplishment! 26 Buckets not only exceeded our lofty goal, but proved to ourselves we have the will and the way to work in the vineyard.

My confession to you all is that I didn't think we'd make it. I have been convinced by the laments of financial worries that assembling 24 buckets was beyond our ability.

I doubted. And I am sorry. I am proud as a peacock and humbled beyond measure.

Another way we can work in the vineyard is with the Caring Ministry. Our first meeting is today after worship. Caring Ministry will help keep us connected to those who, for whatever reason, have had to disconnect from the congregation.

Rev. Margaret Scott who will be helping us organize the Caring Ministry says: "In the Benedictine tradition, it is believed pain isolates and loneliness comes to those who feel separated from the community."

As a community of faith we have an opportunity to live into God's call to work in the vineyard when we visit the sick and hospitalized, deliver home communion to shut ins, make phone calls or send notes or cards to remind folks they are still a part of this body.

Are we able? Are we willing?

If yes, please come to the gathering in the Green Room. Stop and get some coffee and a treat in the parlor first, then come ... and learn how you can be a source of living water to those who thirst.

Trusting God and following Jesus is a two-fold blessing. We are doubly blessed when we offer hope to the hopeless and companionship to the lonely, the sick, the separated.

Our sacrament of Holy Communion is based on the two-fold blessing of repentance and forgiveness. Our approach to the Lord's Table should be done with clean hearts and complete joy.

Some of our greatest psalms were written as a song of approach to God's grace.

From Psalm 51:

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." [Psalm 51:1-2]

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit." [Psalm 51:10-12]

May those words ring in our ears as we bow our heads in prayer ... turning over to God our deepest regrets; our heartfelt sorrows; our baseless doubts ... asking Jesus to remove them

from our presence so that when we approach the table of Grace, we are free to partake and drink deeply from the spring of living water.

Let us pray and remember ... God does not seek to condemn but to save.

Let us confess our sins silently in prayer

Loving God, continue your work of redemption within us. Forgive our sins, cleanse our hearts and deliver us from our individual weaknesses. In the time of temptation help us to be aware of what is happening and to name that temptation for what it is.

Abiding in the love of Jesus, may we withstand temptation's insidious pressures, and take delight in God's still, small voice. May we be both the recipients of salvation and gracious agents of it. To your endless glory, through Christ Jesus our Savior. Amen!

FORGIVENESS

Sisters and brothers, embrace the hope of Jesus. Once you have honestly made your confession, and prayed for forgiveness, don't insult God by returning to the past and poring over your shame. Let the past go. Embrace the future without burden or anxiety. For you will not be left to wander in a wilderness of sin but restored and sustained by God.

Thanks be to God! Amen!