

Sufficient

Exodus 16:2-15
Matthew 20:1-16

What does it take to make us happy? We currently have the tremendous blessing of welcoming our son and his four month-old daughter into our home each Monday. This past week we learned again something we had mostly forgotten: sometimes *nothing* makes babies happy. They cannot articulate why they are distressed, therefore you may not solve whatever their problem may be. Dr. Dan and Grandma Linda checked her diaper, made sure her feeding was on schedule, did everything they could, in their considerable experience and training, and none of it worked. The good news is that the next morning, Baby Ayla awakened in a much improved mood. Granddad Mike had the amazing blessing of joining her in enjoying the movement of the tree leaves and the nuzzling from our curious cat. But not one of us adults knew for sure why Ayla was first, unhappy and second, happy.

When Moses led the children of Israel through the waters of the sea and into freedom from slavery in Egypt, we can easily imagine him thinking, “Well, this ought to earn me some gratitude.” A Hebrew boy, he'd been saved from an edict by the Pharaoh to kill all Hebrew boys by his mother floating him down the Nile toward the Pharaoh's daughter. That woman raised him and he became pals with her son, the heir to the throne of Egypt. So Moses would have spoken Egyptian and had entree

into the court of one of the most powerful despots in history. I have often observed that one of the most accurate interpretations of Moses' early years appears in the opening sequence of the animated Disney movie, *The Prince of Egypt*, where Moses' friend, the future Pharaoh, and he run around disrupting the work of older men.

Moses' life took a turn when he could not stomach the abuse an Egyptian slave master dealt to a Hebrew slave. He killed the Egyptian and fled for his life into the desert. There, he met his future wife and her father, who brought this obviously smart and capable man into his nomadic tribe. The Book of Exodus tells us at this point Moses had come to peace with his life. He had no desire to return to Egypt. He accepted his place. But God had other ideas. Calling from out of a bush burning *but not consumed*, Yahweh summoned Moses to go back to Egypt, to the place with a price on his head. But now, under God's provision, a new Pharaoh occupied the throne, the Pharaoh who had been Moses' essential half-brother as a boy. He and Moses would conduct a lengthy face-off, with God chipping in the plagues to push the balance toward the Hebrews' release. Finally the Pharaoh granted them freedom. The Hebrews fled into the same desert into which Moses had earlier escaped. They passed through the waters of the sea but their Egyptian pursuers did not. The Hebrews got away.

And did they feel grateful to God for their deliverance? Did they pause to erect a monument commemorating their miraculous freedom? Did they give Moses a medal? Not on your life. The chapter before ours contains songs of praise the

Hebrews sang to God for their Exodus out of Egypt. But our passage tells us that almost immediately after that they started complaining. They now faced the Sinai, one of the most forbidding deserts on the planet. Though slaves, they had always had enough to eat and secure places to sleep. As often happens, they preferred the devil they knew. "Why did you do this?" they whined to Moses. Imagine his thoughts and feelings. It is a little-known fact that Harriet Tubman, the heroic former slave who personally led hundreds of slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad, occasionally had to deal with similar responses.

According to the National Park Service website, Harriet Tubman was born into slavery in 1820 or 21 on Maryland's Eastern Shore. She was conducted into freedom on the Railroad in 1849. She settled in Philadelphia. From there she made numerous trips back South and led men, women and children to freedom across the Mason-Dixon line. She became known as Moses. She learned to read and write and recorded that the most frustrating thing about her mission was that she often ran into blacks she had helped gain their freedom, but who were angry about it. "At least we knew how it worked before," one woman told her. "Now we do not know how to make a living." A man told her, "None of us want to be slaves still. But we do not know what to be." The original Moses could have related. As could his people.

Note that though the children of Israel appear ungrateful, the Lord does not renounce them. In fact, Moses seems more impatient than God. He and his brother Aaron look ready to wash their hands of the whole lot. But God has chosen this

people—in front of all the other nations—and God will not turn back on that decision.

The theological implications of this for us are enormous. If God chose to remain faithful to the selfish, shortsighted people of Israel, then we have a chance. We are no better than they. We, too, are dominated by our immediate needs and fears.

Theologian Letty Russell, born in 1929, was one of the first women ordained a minister of the word and sacrament in the Presbyterian Church. (As an aside, another pioneering woman in this regard is our son-in-law's grandmother, Beverly Schmidt.)

Letty Russell wrote in her book, Becoming Human, “Distilled down to its essence, the biblical message is God's word to humanity, 'I love you, despite who you are.'”

Jesus told a parable about how our views of merit do not match God's. Actually, he told a number of them, but we read one of them today. Let us cut to the chase: the payment the workers receive in this parable represents a saving relationship with God. Therefore it does not matter whether we enter into it early or late. No matter whether we connect with God as children and never let go, or have a death-bed conversion, we get paid the same. We enter the realm of God forever. This transaction does not depend on how hard or how long we work. The “owner” calls the shots. God has decided that every sincere response to God's saving work, that every grateful and faithful reaction to being led safely through the waters of the sea, will result in life and life abundantly.

It seems to this pastor that an unfortunate and inaccurate division has developed in the church. What is the purpose of the church? We have reached a

point where many would say to promote justice, to work for God's grace and love to prevail in this world. Many others would say to save souls. Our theological ancestors wrote that *both* ideas *must* “obtain” in the church. That is, the purpose of the church is *both* justice and salvation. And our purpose as members of the church is to live out our commitment to both with as much consistency and integrity as we can. That is the only way we can witness to the Son of God with effectiveness in a world that has become more than a little weary of the posing we see on old-line and social media.

The online culture, the websites we visit, has developed highly-sensitive BS detectors in the great majority of us. From the pulpit I will say that the B in BS stands for bull. I will not say what the S stands for except I think we all know what it is—and that bulls produce prodigious amounts of it. We have been inundated. We have had to learn how to identify misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and the like. And whether we like it or not, many people outside the church believe we are full of it. They think they see that our actions do not square with our words. They think we profess faith in the God of love but do not love whole groups of other people. They think we pretend to follow the God of justice but support all kinds of injustice. They think we assume the airs of people who have attained spiritual maturity but do not really subscribe to the disciplines of our religion.

These are uncomfortable words to hear. They may strike us as unfair. And to a certain extent, they are every bit as judgmental as our critics accuse us of being. *All of which does not matter.* Because God has hired us. We are supposed to be

working in God's vineyard. We are meant to bear fruit, to witness to God's love and justice with an authenticity that draws others into the same work. So how does that look?

Authentic Christianity looks like prayer partners finding out how their partner's school year is going, how the game or show went, and to pray *with them*. Authentic Christianity looks like refusing to join in faculty lounge gossip. Authentic Christianity looks like humbly but consistently walking our talk. Mark Twain skirted the edges of Christianity for most of his adult life. But as he grew older he became more overtly spiritual. In his 1907 essay Christian Science, published at the age of 67, Twain wrote, "The Christians I 'listen to' talk with their actions. People like Harriet Tubman risking her own life repeatedly to save others make me sit up and hear what they have to say." Twain's family had a slave during his boyhood in Florida, Missouri. His uncle had several. Yet this man would mature in his faith to the point where he became an ardent opponent of slavery *on Christian grounds*. He would write one of the earliest sympathetic escaped slave characters in all of fiction, Jim, in *Huckleberry Finn*. He would give a tremendous amount of money to the Aid Society of Hartford, Connecticut. The Society worked to educate former slaves and their descendants.

We labor for the God who chose us despite ourselves. We labor for the God who calls us to authentic love and justice. We labor for the wages of salvation. This reward is more than sufficient. In fact, it gives life meaning and purpose. And the reward avails not just for ourselves, but also for those whom we serve in God's name.

Christians, walk your talk. *Do* Jesus for a watching world.