**Sermon: Grumbling About God’s Terms**

**Scripture: Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

**Date: September 20, 2020**

Thank you Susan for reading that provocative parable from Jesus. And it’s good to have the voice of our Jewish brother Andy Spiegel reading from Exodus for us, especially as we remember that our Jewish siblings across the world have, as of yesterday, entered into their high holy days beginning with Rosh Hoshana… their new year celebration. Rosh Hoshana is positioned here in the fall and arose as a celebration of the beginning of the economic year with the bringing in of the harvest. One of the best-known rituals of Rosh Hashana is the blowing of the shofar which is supposed to be a wake up call, stirring Jews to mend their ways and repent and is often accompanied by the phrase “Sleepers, wake up from your slumber! Examine your ways, repent and remember your Creator!”

So it is good and right that here at the beginning of this new school year and new church year – in September of 2020 - we are given these two scriptures from the Old and New Testament that call us to examine our ways and remember our Creator! It’s a good way of hearing all of Jesus’ parables - as a literary shofar blast to our consciousness challenging our normal way of understanding the world and awakening us to God’s understanding.

And today for both stories the shofar blast comes in the midst of human grumbling! I don’t know about you, but I do my fair share of grumbling – why did our neighbor do that? Wait, that property tax increase is monthly? Really, you’re going to park there? That’s what the school committee decided? Isn’t there anything else that the news can talk about but him? Grumble, grumble, grumble! Just like the Hebrew people out in the wilderness grumbling against God and Moses “you led us out into the wilderness but at least when we were slaves we had enough to eat, we were comfortable where we slept! We’re tired, thirsty and hungry much of the time with no idea where we are actually going. Man I wish we were back in Egypt! Give me a pyramid to build any day over this!” And Moses is standing there and God is there like “good gracious, really? Some physical discomfort and you’re ready to return to Egypt?”

And so God and Moses work out a deal which seems like it’s almost more about them not having to listen to all the grumbling and so manna drops from the sky like dew for the people in the wilderness. BUT it’s accompanied by strict guidelines – they can only collect enough to eat for the day and they can’t store up more for themselves and hoard the food, then they will have enough – like Jake’s plants, just enough, not too much! And everyone was like “woohoo!! This is awesome!!...” for a while until they get sick of manna eventually and start saying “I wish we could have some meat around here!”

But suffice it to say, as the story proceeds God does provide for them, but under God’s terms, and God’s terms are so often not congruent with human terms. The Jewish prophets, of which our Lord Jesus was one, are always saying this – you, my people, are operating under human terms and it is not going to go well for everyone. Listen instead, these are Gods’ terms for how you should live - and all the prophets are consistent in their insistence that under God’s terms those in need are provided for, those discarded are retrieved, the voiceless are given a voice, the marginalized are centralized, the under-privileged are privileged, the disinherited inherited… that’s the drum they beat over and over again, that’s what God cares about how we are treated the least of those among us. And almost always those who already have what they need and then some, the privileged and centralized and established don’t much like it. But, unlike the Hebrews in the wilderness, the established and privileged and powerful don’t just grumble about it, they go and make policy to ensure their own terms and not God’s terms hold the day.

Jesus, in proper Jewish prophet fashion, was a promoter of God’s terms and because those ran counter to Caesar’s terms and the terms of the religious establishment of the day, he was strung up on a cross to be silenced. But before they got to him he went around the land of Palestine teaching and his teachings were like shofar blast wake-up calls for those who would hear. “Sleepers, wake up from your slumber! Examine your ways, repent and remember your Creator!” Such was the little parable of the workers in the vineyard.

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who goes out to hire day workers. When you hear Jesus speak of the kingdom of heaven, don’t think he is talking about the afterlife, when we die, angels-playing-harps-in-clouds, kind of heaven. He’s not. That interpretation is one of the ways we have tried to work it so that our human terms can remain operational HERE by relegating God’s terms to the AFTERLIFE. But Jesus is talking about the intersection of the heavenly dimension and the earthly dimension in the here and now, how to make it on earth as it is in heaven!

So the kingdom of heaven under God’s terms in contrast to the kingdom of this world under human terms is like a landowner going out to hire day workers. He negotiates a fair wage – which a denarius truly is, more than fair - with those he hires at the beginning of the day but then goes out 4 more times throughout the day continuing to hire even to the point where there are some who only work an hour at the very end of the day. The kicker comes when the landowner goes to pay everyone and starts with those who worked least and gives them a denarius and when those who worked the full day get the same denarius they had negotiated, they grumble against the landowner – “we toiled all day in the hot sun and you’re going to give us the same as those who swung in here at the last minute and barely worked a hour? What the heck, man, this isn’t fair. Can you believe this stuff?!”

The landowner responds – “did we not agree to this wage, what is it to you if I am generous and give those who only worked an hour the same that I give you?” And we, along with those laboring all day, are caught before we even know it appalled by his injustice, but also embarrassed by the smallness of our own upset. What IS it to us if he is generous to the others… What keeps us from rejoicing, actually, being happy for those who were hired at the last minute and didn’t work as hard as us, that they received a generous pay from the landowner? Why wouldn’t we also celebrate that?! Good for them. They too got what they needed and they didn’t have to work as hard as us!

But if this what the kingdom of God is like, whichs is what Jesus says it is, many of us in our competitive merit-based society might stick with the kingdom of man, thank you very much, much like the Hebrews desiring the life of Egyptian slavery in the face of what wilderness freedom entailed. Despite what some might claim, God’s grace-laden kingdom is not the same thing as America’s competitive merit-based kingdom which has never from day one offered a level playing field to all its citizens.

And how quickly do those of us who have all we need (and then more) forget how unmerited and unearned so much of it is and we look to the disinherited and say “should’ve worked a little longer, a little harder, stopped looking for handouts” instead of saying - “oh good, I’m so glad that they are getting what they need too.”

We live in a country, in a kingdom of man (and I’m using that gender designation very intentionally) where so many of those who have what they need have so much more than they need and where there are too many who don’t have nearly what they need… in MA specifically 684,000 people live below the federal poverty line which is $24K for a family of 4. We can argue til the cows come home about whether it’s the government that should be helping those people or private citizens, but as followers of Jesus Christ, the one who told parables like this, one thing we cannot say is that they are on their own or that they don’t deserve more or that I worked hard for what I have and they need to pull themselves up by the bootstraps. That’s a kingdom of man response, not a Kingdom of God response. We must ask as Christians what do people need and be counter-cultural in refusing to ask what it is that people deserve, because honestly our humble Christ requires us to humbly acknowledge our own dependence upon God and that God’s grace is not something that any of us have earned or deserve but rather is something freely given out of love… otherwise it is not love cause love does not require one to earn it.

And what a shame if we are to grumble – “well, that’s love and God and spirituality and church-talk, we’re talking about the economy, government policy, and finance and society can’t be built on love and run by love, give me a break.” … spoken by those that benefit from the largely un-loving way society is organized.

But seriously if that seems overwhelming to think about how our society can be run and built on love instead of a distorted sense of who deserves what, then we can start small for that’s what Jesus did when he gathered 12 people around him. The church was built by Jesus as a community within the larger society, where kingdom principles could be practiced, where all had a voice and could get enough, where some weren’t privileged over others, where money was equally distributed, where there were no barriers based on race or nation or age or marital status, a little microcosm of heaven you might say, not with the idea that Christians could then be separated from society and insulated from it. Not that at all, but rather that a little enclave of loving community, working to live on God’s terms and not human terms, would act as leaven for the larger society, God’s love infiltrating all culture, like the spread of a pandemic but not of disease but rather of wellness and health. That’s the role and work of the church that we are called to.

When the temple was built by Solomon after the Israelites established themselves in the holy land, it was not to be a place of privilege and isolation and domination but rather a source for God’s blessing and wisdom and holiness and people were called there so that God’s righteousness could spread from there out to all the world.

May the same be true of the church, that as we are called weekly to gather within the virtual walls of our church to worship and pray, we might receive what we need to be emissaries of God’s love out to the world…

Come dwell in Solomon's walls…. The beautiful anthem that we always sing on the first Snuday of the new church year sings -

Where the humble bow down, seeking wisdom and strength,

for the Lord dwells within and heals their land… come and dwell in the house of the Lord. Where wisdom and righteousness, justice and holiness, join at the feet of God.

When the people of this house kneel and humbly pray,

when they turn from dark to light and God’s will obey,

O Lord of Heaven and Lord of earth, show favor on this house,

and heal, restore, forgive, and bless, Lord, we pray… in Jesus’ name, amen!