



Murillo's Abraham receiving the Three Angels

The Collect this morning is a prayer for the Church. It entreats God and ourselves that as the Body of Christ we may always proclaim the Gospel with boldness and practice justice with compassion. This is a prayer whose time is always now. And if you read the Scripture passages for this morning carefully, it would seem that this bold proclamation of the Gospel and the compassionate practice of justice requires us to depart from what is the purely conventional.

A convention is an agreement which is supposed to govern some form of human practice or behavior according to what is considered to be reasonable terms. So, conventions are founded on human reason. But here's the thing. God's grace and mercy is anything but reasonable from any kind of human standpoint. Who would send their perfect son to die a bloody torturous

death for the very ones who murder him. What kind of reasonable parent would do that? No, the salvation we receive through grace in the faith in The Christ absolutely defies the humanly conventional and reasonable.

In Genesis 18, Abraham abandons convention and runs to meet God. The footnotes in my Bible note how this would be a departure from the normal, dignified social behavior for a man of some years. But, I am reminded of a story that was told about an elderly man who attended the church where I was serving while in Seminary. This man's son had suffered from drug addiction. And the father couldn't release his grip on the fact that with all the sons advantages available in the loving and privileged home the father had provided for him growing up – the father steeped in the social conventions and expectations of his culture just couldn't come to terms with how this son of privilege had let himself fall prey to drugs. No, the father just couldn't seem to get beyond his insistence on the behavioral conventions he held so dear, and predictably the story ended tragically with the son's drug overdose. Later that Spring, the church held a foot-washing as part of their Maundy Thursday observances. And when a young man who was living on the streets turned up that night to have his feet washed, the elderly father of the boy who had died ran full-tilt from the back of the church to the basin to wash that young man's feet. You see, that father had finally come face to face with the compassion that is truly needed in order to greet mercy in this life. Oh yes, that kind of love, selfless, total love, that strain of compassion is a complete departure from what is conventional.

The Gospel is surely a departure from any conventions of that day. The sending out of the 12 in Matthew 10 is motivated by Jesus' determination to practice compassion. Jesus's commissioning of The Twelve comes about, we are told, because of the deep compassion he had for the crowds coming to him who were as so many shepherd-less sheep, a ripe harvest of salvation waiting on insufficient gatherers (See Mt.36-38). In the Commissioning of Simon Peter and his 11 friends, Jesus also describes here a process which is fraught with challenges and threats (Mt.10:21-23a). But this process apparently has no targeted conclusion – no expiry date or deadline, since Jesus promises us that there will still be towns left to visit by the time the Son of Man comes back. (Mt.10:23b) So, Christ sets up for us here a process which is destined to be incomplete even as it is formulated by him at the very beginning of his promise of redemption. Hmm...maybe, just maybe we've been focusing too much on outcomes and not enough on conversion.

This is what I see more and more in the Church. It is normal for us to establish objectives and goals, both in our temporal affairs and in our Spiritual life. However, in the case of our relationship with God and our communion with each other, more and more I am convinced that the objectives and goals we set have nothing to do with what God is doing in our lives and church.

We may well become determined to have our wonderful new kitchen finished and functioning by a certain date. And that's great. And we also may well have planned a new exam room to be set up in the clinic area of the Community Health Outreach Center. And that's wonderful. But the outcomes of that kitchen and exam room may be completely secondary to the work that God is doing in the midst of all this to bring his people closer to each other and to him, and to build a stronger and more powerful bond of love between disparate people so that his name might be glorified and his Kingdom truly come on earth as it is in heaven. You see, it is not in the completion of these objectives but in the midst of the process itself that God works his miracles which are beyond human understanding. Yes invisible, ineffable, immutable wonders of God brought about in the midst of this glorious, confusing, messy and marvelous process called "Redemption."

In Genesis 18, Sarah's laugh about bearing a child in her golden years is one of disbelief. But God changes that to a laugh of ecstatic joy in the blessing that will come about in the birth of Isaac, a name associated with laughter.

If we could only in the trenches of life understand that when we weep for loss or grief, for the believer those tears are (pre)destined to become tears of joy. When we cry out in pain and distress, for the believer, those cries are destined eventually to become shouts of joy and exultation.

This is surely what the challenges of Rom. 5 are all about in the way God uses sufferings as the transformative vehicle for the hope that does not disappoint. And the final product of this hope that comes from all that suffering, and endurance, can character-building – that hope culminates in the joyous feast made possible by Grace through the faith in Christ. Paul talks about this feast here which leads us to the peace recognized in both testaments as our reconciliation with God (Rom. 5:11; 2Cor. 5). So our laughter of fatalistic resignation over a seemingly insurmountable challenge, that bitter laughter is destined to become the laughter of joy. The tears we shed in grief are destined to be transformed to tears of delirious rejoicing. And when we cry out in suffering, we must never forget that God always hears us. And sooner or later, in his perfect time, those cries for help are surely destined to be shouts of victory.

That's the way the Psalm for this morning starts [Mary's request for the Psalm – a God thing] The Title in the Psalter indicates the Psalm may have been used for the peace offering, which was the time of fellowship (ESV footnote, 224). The Peace Offering was stipulated in Leviticus as food to be brought to the Temple for one of three reasons. It might be an offering to recognize God's special favor on an individual. It could mark the completion of a vow. Or the Peace Offering could simply be an individual's expression of devotion. In any case, the completion of a vow, or simply to express devotion, which was co-notated as a "Freewill Offering." (See Lev.7:11-18). But in any case, the Peace Offering was always considered a common feast with God.

This then is the peace that truly passes all understanding. That you and I have been so "righteoused" by the gift of God's son, that we can be completely reconciled to the Creator God and come before him to feast at his table. That is the kind of totally unconventional love that you and I receive in our redemption by the means of grace and for the hope of glory.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

JWB+ 6-15-17