

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 22-B (3 Oct 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2021-09-28 Tue 16:05>

Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Job 1:1; 2:1-10, Psalm 26, Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12, Mark 10:2-16

1 Beginning with God's abundance

The Lord be with you! (And also with you.) Let us pray.

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Our collect today is about *abundance*. Specifically, our collect reminds us that abundance always begins with God. God is abundant in hearing us - we can never pray too much, but God will be ready to hear more. God is abundant in giving to us, more than we could possibly wish for. God is abundant in mercy, both in forgiving us where we fail and also in giving us good things that we are ashamed even to ask for. Abundance begins with God, and abundance is the overwhelming reality of life in God.

2 Divorce

Our Gospel reading, at first glance, doesn't seem to be about abundance at all, but about divorce. When Jesus gets asked about divorce, the first thing he does is push the question back to his interrogators by asking them, "What does the Bible say?" They answer him, "Divorce is allowed." Jesus affirms that they are correct. Divorce happens. Relationships come apart. God recognized this from the beginning, and the *Torah* offered instruction on how to navigate this troubling occurrence in a way that would reduce the pain and suffering which divorcees would have to endure. Jesus recognizes this and makes sure it gets stated right from the beginning of the conversation. This is the starting point.

Then Jesus goes on to say something that every person who has been divorced knows from personal experience. Divorce hurts. Divorce is painful. Divorce is messy, complicated, and sometimes devastating. Sometimes, divorce is necessary. But that pain, that messiness, that complexity of relationship, is not what God intends for human beings. Nor is it what people getting married intend, either!

Here's the issue. The relationship of love between two human beings that results in an exclusive promise to one another is intended to be a relationship of abundant love that provides a window on God's love for us. When that love is not so abundant, when one partner decides to leave *one* relationship in order to pursue *another*, that's called adultery. Then the abundance of love for which our souls were created gets traded in for something more transactional and self-seeking. This is when sin enters into a relationship and people get hurt. People feel used. That's the breakage in relationships that the Pharisees knew Jesus would call out— just like all the other sins of injustice and hurt that Jesus preached against.

Jesus' words on divorce are not intended to make anyone stay in an abusive or hurtful relationship. When a relationship has ended, when persons are being hurt, the Bible's instructions are to get the piece of paper recognizing that fact so that both parties can move on with their lives with a clear boundary between them.

Jesus is not condemning anyone for having a divorce in their past. Jesus is not saying *anything* about the genders of those who might get married. Jesus is referring to Scripture to point to the kind of deep, intimate relationships for which God created us: a relationship that can only exist in the context of trust developed through years of sustained effort. Jesus is inviting each of us into the abundance of God's love, sharing that love with one another, in faithful and mutually self-emptying relationships with spouses, Christians sisters and brothers, friends, and neighbors. Because abundance begins with God, and abundance is the overwhelming reality of life in God.

3 Stewardship

This weekend we celebrated God's abundant love as some of us experience it in simpler relationships. At the Feast of St. Francis we like to bless the animals. Today I like to call "Stuffy Sunday" and invite children to bring their stuffed animals to receive a blessing. Our pets, whether living or stuffed, represent to us an *abundance* of affection, acceptance, and unconditional love that point us to God like few other presences in our lives. So we give thanks to God for these objects of our affections, these trainers that show us the abundance God intends for our deeper and more complex relationships with one another.

And this is our tie back to Stewardship. Because just as abundance in loving relationships begins with God, so does abundant giving. Our love reflects God's love. Our giving reflects God's giving. Our sustained commitment reflects God's unending commitment to us.

One path down this road is to point to the biblical requirement of giving, even tithing, which means to give 10% of your income. It's in there, back in the *Torah*. But legalism about giving is the same loveless strategy that the Pharisees were using in our Gospel today when they challenged Jesus about his views on divorce. No one is going to buy their way to heaven with a tithe, just as no one is going to guarantee their entry into God's kingdom by keeping all the rest of the law. That's not how this works. It misses the point!

As you hear about stewardship over the weeks to come, as you receive a couple different mailings, including one with a pledge card, keep your eyes *focused* on the abundance of God. I encourage you not to give out of a feeling of guilt, obligation, or legalism. St. Thomas' is not a charity demanding your sympathy or an entertainment venue where you have to pay your way. We're not in the business of earning God's approval. Instead, St. Thomas' is part of Christ's Church, where all we do begins and ends in the abundance of God. Your pledge is your opportunity to practice recognizing that abundance, imitating it so that you can learn to notice it and rejoice more whole-heartedly in God's grace shown to you. In worship, service, learning, and giving, we nurture our souls and seek to draw close to God. I invite you to consider in prayer even today what kind of pledge makes sense for your particular household. Listen for God's abundance to reveal itself in you, and then share that abundance on the pledge card you'll get in a couple weeks.

Stewardship begins with God's abundance. Because abundance begins with God, and abundance is the overwhelming reality of life in God.

Amen