



It is Christ who invites us to meet him here

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given September 24, 2017

Exodus 16:2-15, Proper 20A

My family went to the Renaissance Festival recently. How many of you have been to it? If you haven't gone, you should surely get there at least once, because it truly a spectacle to behold. There are thousands of people milling around a huge reconstructed village completely made to look as if it were Europe 500 years ago. There are jesters and jugglers and insulters and fairies and nobility and all kinds of fun stuff. But my point isn't about the Renaissance Festival. While we were there, it was pretty hot. And while we were standing in line to get some food, I heard a very newborn baby really crying. For those of you who have had babies or who have been around babies, you know the kind of cry I'm talking about. It was past the point of the initial whimper or even winding up. This baby was hysterical. I looked around for it and I found it. It was in a car seat in a stroller, with a blanket draped over it, so that I couldn't actually see the baby, but I could hear the cries coming from there. The blanket kept moving as the baby's arms and legs were kicking it, as it was crying in total distress. The baby's parents were standing there, eating an ice cream cone and talking, completely unresponsive to the baby's distress. It went on and on. The baby kept crying really hard, and the parents kept not responding. It was hard to listen to. Now, I don't know what the circumstances were. I know that some parents have used the cry-it-out method for teaching their babies to go to sleep and I'm not here to weigh in about whether or not I think that's a good parenting technique. But I will tell you that I was genuinely disturbed, watching this unfold, because what I wanted more than anything for that baby was for a caring adult to acknowledge its distress and tend to whatever needs it had, even if the baby was just crying because it was so hot that day. I wanted that baby to have an adult acknowledge its distress because that is how babies learn what psychologists have referred to as the first developmental stage or lesson in life, which is trust or mistrust. The way babies learn how to trust is to have a caring adult respond to them when they cry in a way that takes care of their needs. Now again, I don't know what the story was with that particular baby

and those particular parents. But I do know that embedded in our DNA, in the earliest most primal stages of our development, is the raw need to be heard and cared for when we are in distress.

Today we heard the story of the Israelites in the wilderness complaining and grumbling to Moses and Aaron because they are hungry. Now, I imagine that some of you grew up with this story and you know it well, and I can also imagine that some of you might be less familiar with it, so I hope you'll bear with me as I give you some background to set the stage for understanding this story. The Israelites have been slaves in Egypt for 400 years. They have suffered unbearably and cruelly as they are made to support Pharaoh's empire even as he is systematically killing their baby boys. And finally, after 400 years, God hears their cries and determines to deliver them. So God sends Moses and Aaron to confront Pharaoh, and the great drama unfolds and they leave Egypt, cross the Red Sea, and enter the desert. They are free. But they are also hungry, and they are in the wilderness with no water and no food. So they complain. And you know what? I know the traditional way to interpret this story is to blame them for their complaining. Shouldn't they trust the God who just delivered them from slavery? Shouldn't they trust the God who defeated Pharaoh before their very eyes? Well, yes, they should – except that they don't have much experience with this God, and the way the people of God learn to trust God is very much the way a baby learns to trust its parents – which is to cry, and be heard and cared for.

You see, the Israelites had been made to worship false gods in Egypt. When I say that I think most of us get confused because we think of this in modern terms, like the Israelites were following the “wrong” religion in Egypt. But that's not what I understand the biblical narrative to mean. The Hebrew word for worship is the exact same word that means work, serve, or even slave for. What you work for is what you worship, to the Hebrew mind. So the Israelites had been forced, in order to survive, to work for the empire of Egypt. To worship the Pharaoh and the anticreational forces of oppression that kept the Egyptians benefitting from their exploited labor. So the Israelites, in the meaning of the Hebrew imagination, had been forced for their survival to worship / serve false gods- the Egyptian empire that cared nothing for their welfare, that loathed and feared them.

My point is that the Israelites had 400 years of experience with oppression, and not a whole lot of experience with this God who was the God of their ancestors, the God who the scriptures say heard their cries, saw their suffering, listened to

their groaning and who was coming to help them. The Israelites had been freed, but they were hungry, and they needed to learn to trust this God. And so they complained, and God heard them, and gave them what they needed. They were used to being productive for the empire in order to survive. But out in the wilderness they were completely useless. They had no cities to build for Rameses, no bricks to bake from straw they collected. They could offer nothing to this new God for their survival, and so they panicked. And God heard them, and understood their misery and their fear and their hunger, and fed them. And they began to learn what it was to trust God, a God who loved them not for their productivity but for who they were. A God who loved them like good parents love their children.

Now, maybe I'm being overly generous to the Israelite people. Maybe they should have been more mature than newborn babies crying for help. But the gospel text from today says something related. In the gospel text from today Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom of God. In that parable God is compared to a vineyard owner who pays everybody the same wage for their labor. God gives the same wage to those who have worked hard since the break of day and to those who at the eleventh hour finally got around to figuring out they should maybe help out. What is the point about this God? The point is the same one Tom made last week when he talked about forgiveness, when he said that our God is a God of a mercy that transcends justice. We have to hear this message over and over again in order to learn to trust it. We keep believing that we have to earn the love of God. It seems to be human nature to believe, like the people of Israel did, that it's our productivity or our success or our ethical behavior or our usefulness that will ensure our safety and prosperity and value in the eyes of God. But the point of the God of our tradition is that it is precisely when you are helpless, or without merit or value, and from that place cry for help, that God hears and responds with love and generosity and mercy. The wage that God pays at the end of the day is not a guarantee of safety, or prosperity, or even health. What God gives is God's unconditional and infinite love and care and presence, and enough manna for today, our daily bread. God gives the provision that we need to move faithfully through this day, because tomorrow is a new day with different challenges and God invites us to be as dependent on God tomorrow as we are today – so that we can cry out for help again tomorrow and be heard again tomorrow, and learn to trust God not because we have it all together but because we don't.

It is a great gift to reach the place where you acknowledge your need and cry out to God for help. My prayer is that you will recognize the manna you receive, even though it may seem small and insignificant and unfamiliar. In a few minutes we'll take the eucharist, and you'll receive just a small piece of bread and a small sip of wine. These are not enough to constitute a normal human meal, by ordinary standards. But in this small meal we encounter the risen Christ, the one who teaches us over and over again about the overwhelming love of God. May you acknowledge your need and cry out to God for help. May you be nourished at the Lord's table and every day as you move through the week. It is Christ who invites us to meet him here.