

Sermon – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 20: 1-16

As summer starts to fade and we move ever so gingerly into the Fall season, we find ourselves somewhat in the midst of the eye of the storm. The storm this year is the COVID-19 pandemic and like any hurricane type storm there is an eye, a middle period to the storm when calmness evolves out of the chaos but anxiety remains because the backside of the storm is yet to come. Sometimes with climatic storms the eye brings on a false sense of security. Many people leave their homes and shelters only to be caught out by the aggression of the last phase of the storm.

The pandemic storm is no less dangerous. We have endured a traumatic spring and a relative calm summer, where infection rates and deaths look a decidedly downward trajectory. We now await the back side of the storm. The experts are predicting another tough period when the annual flu season combines with the COVID-19 virus to create a testing time for all of us.

Many have been lulled into a false sense of security, believing the worst is behind us. Maybe it is but we can't be certain. When we emerge from winter next spring we will be able to look back and assess how we did. There will be the before and after experiences.

Our lives are marked by these before and after experiences. Just in the past 20 years, most of the citizens of the City of New York have lived through 9/11, the 2008 global financial crisis, Superstorm Sandy, the terrible mass shootings at schools such as Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, the appalling police shootings of unarmed black men and women and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, and now the COVID-19 pandemic. Each one of these major life events marks a pivot point in our lives. We know how life was before the event, and then how life changed after the event.

Our lives of faith can be viewed through the same lens as these major civil events. We have our lives before we committed them to Jesus Christ, and we have our lives since. In essence, our lives are lived in two halves. These halves are not necessarily equal in time as the point in which we find ourselves answering the call of the Holy Spirit might occur when we are children, adults or senior citizens. If you think back over your life you might be able to distinctly recall a life before your commitment to Christ and a changed life afterwards.

Richard Rohr, a contemporary Franciscan spiritual writer, writes about the two halves of life in his book *Falling Upwards: The Spirituality of the Two Halves of Life*. Rohr talks of the first half of life as a time when we are focused on creating the vessel of life, the container, our own identity. In the first period we are trying to work out the boundaries of our existence, find the edges of security, define ourselves as something or someone, and not the other. We don't thrive as human beings without the creation of a safe container.

The second half of life Rohr writes is all about filling the container. Finding the contents that will create our rewarding life. We might not know what we need as content but over time we

encounter it. It is all about the time ahead of us, what is being offered to us and what we pay attention to. This phase of life is where we encounter love, satisfaction, success, suffering, setbacks, betrayals, death, illness and failure.

Because the second half of life is a life lived under the grace of a loving God, we work through these encounters with that same grace-filled attitude and posture that leads to a positive and hope-filled outlook, an outlook that accepts the situations of life as part of life and not as punishment. We see this time as a learning time, a time where our souls and bodies evolve and we grow in faith and love.

However, even in this second phase of life, negativity remains a very real force that sits waiting to overwhelm us. When we experience setbacks, illness, deaths of loved ones and other forms of suffering we might slip back into a time of feeling that life is unfair, that we don't deserve what is happening to us.

I found myself slipping back just yesterday as I mourned the death of Justice Ruth Bader-Ginsburg, a champion of justice for all. I found myself thinking it would be grossly unfair if the President pushed forward a new Supreme Court nominee, and the Senate sought to confirm the nominee before the new President is sworn in, in repudiation of their stance just five years ago. It would be the height of hypocrisy. However, this sermon was resonating in my head so I found myself wrestling with my thoughts.

Richard Rohr also writes that we often see and experience God in two separate forms, one as we live through creating our container of life and the second as we fill our containers with life events, after we have accepted Jesus Christ as our savior. In the first half we see God almost as an arbiter, a higher power that sits in judgement of us. If we do something we perceive as sinful the negative life events might be perceived as punishment.

As we move over the threshold of life and into the second half we come to see God as more of a unifier, Rohr says. We become less dualistic, moving from seeing everything as good or bad, fair or unfair, deserving or undeserving and so forth. We come to see all of life as experiences that go to fill our life's vessel, or life's container with meaningful experiences that help us to move deeper and deeper into a spirit-filled life.

Rohr cites theologian Jurgen Moltman who said of suffering, "suffering is not a problem to be solved but instead that suffering is an aspect of God's very being. God is love, and love invariably involves suffering." When we love someone deeply and they develop an illness and die our suffering can be overwhelming. We can feel that life most definitely is unfair.

But if we think about it, the depth of love that we have for our friend, partner or child equates often to the degree of suffering we feel when they leave us. If we didn't love the other so greatly we would not suffer as deeply. To withhold love so that we don't suffer when the other departs does not make a lot of sense.

Love is God, God is love but we know God suffered deeply as his son Jesus Christ was violently crucified by the state. We follow in God's footsteps.

In Richard Rohr's follow-up book, *Immortal Diamond* Rohr calls God the "great Allower," for he says God allows suffering to happen to humankind. God allows the natural world to create storms, floods, droughts, wildfires, and earthquakes. God allows people to suffer during these events and also at the hands of others.

God is not a puppet-master God, controlling every action we take, experience we have and thought we make. God allows life to happen to all of us, and it is for us to make sense of life. If our lives stay wholly in the first half, as Rohr describes, then we might stay outside of God's love, stay in that negative mindset of unfairness, rather after we surrender our lives to God in full reconciliation, come to accept life as a gift from God, life experiences as grace-filled gifts.

We are richer human beings for the life experiences we live through, painful and joyous as they may be, than we would ever be from a life manipulated to avoid pain and joy, suffering and love.

The teachings of Jesus contained in this week, and last week's gospel readings are all about the invitation of God to move from the first half of life into the second half. Last week we heard the parable of the servant who had his debt forgiven by his master when he pleaded for more time to settle it. His master forgave him but the servant then failed to convey the same grace and forgiveness to his debtors, violently seizing one by the throat before locking him up in debtors' prison until he could pay what he owed. When the master found out he summoned the servant to ask him why he didn't pay forward the same benefit he was offered. He seemingly had no answer.

Jesus teaches that we are to forgive our brothers and sisters from the heart. This often is only possible when we are living in the second half of life.

Today's parable of the vineyard laborers echoes with the same teaching. The owner engaged some laborers early in the day to work in the vineyard. They agreed on a wage and set about to do the work they agreed to do. The owner kept going out from his property and each time saw idle men loitering around. He offered them meaningful work in the vineyard and agreed to pay them what he paid the others.

At the end of the day the laborers hired first grumbled that they have been treated unfairly as they worked longer hours, even though they agreed to the employment arrangements. The feeling of unfairness came over them when they compared themselves with the others. They were envious of the other laborers who worked less hours.

The owner rightly pointed out to them that he did them no wrong as he paid them what they agreed. It was his right as owner, he said, to pay workers as he saw fit. The owner invited the grumbling workers to step into his world, to see the world from his perspective.

Similarly, God invites all of us to step out of our first life world, where we see things dualistically, as fair and unfair as in this parable, and into our second life where we see the world through God's eyes, and act accordingly. God acts always with mercy and grace, love and generosity, forgiveness and comfort, even as God experiences rejection by so much of God's creation.

Finally, Jesus teaches his disciples that "the first shall be last and the last shall be first." In doing so, Jesus calls all of us to care for the last, the lost, the least, and the lonely. We are called to be servants of God to the world and the servants of action in the body of Jesus Christ. We are to help bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

Life in two halves. Which half are you living in at present?

Amen