

Sunday, September 21, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Generous God!”

Jesus was a master storyteller.

His use of parables engaged his listeners and got his point across in a memorable way.

He knew how to motivate, agitate and reflect, all in one tale.

We love stories – this is why we go to the movies or read books.

Each story gives us an opportunity to examine ourselves – to see which characters resonate with us.

Sometimes we see our best traits – other times our flaws.

What did you hear in the gospel reading?

Did you hear a message of generosity?

Do you think the landowner was a benevolent soul or a lousy business manager?

Would you have been one of the whining workers or would you have been able to celebrate your neighbor’s good fortune?

New testament scholar Amy Jill Levine suggests that “When it comes to parables and to ancient texts in general, our listening skills are not as developed as they should be.”

Too often we hear the ancient stories in such a way that we discount the good news that they contain for us today.

Levine points out “the parables tease us into recognizing what we’ve already always known, and they do so by reframing our vision. The point is less that they reveal something new than that they tap into our memories, our values, and our deepest longings, and so they resurrect what is very old, and very wise, and very precious. And often,” she concludes, “very unsettling.”

I particularly like the idea of reframing something that we think we know, particularly something about ourselves.

Lets take a look at the Old Testament story that we heard earlier.

The Israelites have left their homes – where they were slaves, don’t forget - to follow Moses out of Egypt and into the wilderness.

God has assured Moses that he has a plan for them, but the wandering Israelites are not privy to that plan.

They start to grouse about their conditions.

Moses pleads with God for some help and God rains manna from the sky.

One of the things I love about this story is how God answers prayers in ways that we might not expect.

The Israelites pray for food.

I'm sure they meant, food as they know it – not some foreign source coming down from heaven in odd flakes that they could eat.

What are the chances that the manna from heaven could have been missed because no one was looking for it?

What are the chances that blessings in your own life might be missed because you are not seeing what God is offering?

Kate Huey comments on this passage: When God met Moses up on that mountain and gave him his assignment to bring the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, Moses asked for God's name.

While God's response is translated in various and interesting ways, most often as "I Am Who I Am," another version is particularly fitting for our story today: "I will be who I will be."

Someone has rendered this as "I will be what is needed at the time."

The wilderness in today's passage provides a perfect setting for God to be exactly that: just what the people need at that moment in time.

When the Israelites were in bondage in Egypt, they needed freedom, and God freed them.

Now, in the wilderness, they need food.

Once again, the "God who will be what is needed" responds with manna, bread from heaven.

So too, for the laborers in the vineyard.

Whether early in the morning, at 9:00, at noon, at 3:00 or at 5 – when work was needed, it was provided.

God, our wonderful God of grace and glory gives us what we need, when we need it.

Much of our lives are spent pursuing things that we don't need.

We are such a rewards-based society that we automatically go there.

These are not stories about rewards but stories about grace.

One commentator pointed out that “If we start asking ourselves who deserves to be forgiven, we soon are reminded that the answer is no one.

No matter how hard we work, we can't be "enough."

But that doesn't matter, because Christ was enough for us.

In God's kingdom, all are equally prosperous and poor, saint and sinner, manager and minion.

We receive exactly what we need, from a God who's notoriously generous and lavish.”

The divine message is that we have enough...there is enough food, water, jobs, wages, love, power – whatever we need – we just have to share it.

Another commentator suggests that “One of the ways that grace can be understood is as God's undeserved generosity.

The key in all our dealings with God is that word "undeserved".

It is easy to slip into thinking that health, wealth and happiness are a deserved reward from God given because we are particularly spiritual or "good".

It is just as easy to fall into judgement of those who are sickly, poor or suffering because we believe that their struggles are God's judgement on some sin in their life.

Both "blessing" and "curses" are simple realities of living in this world.

Sometimes we bring them on ourselves, and sometimes they just happen to us, but they are not the results of a fickle God handing out rewards and punishments.

One thing that is clear from the Scriptures is that when we are "blessed", it is never for ourselves alone, but in order for us to be a blessing to others.

And when others seem to be "more blessed" than we are, we are not to judge them or question God's justice.

We are to give thanks for what we have received, while rejoicing in the good fortune of those around us.

In the week ahead I invite you to release any feelings of deservedness and undeservedness and practice celebrating and sharing your blessings in whatever way you can.

Look around you for manna; accept your wage with gratitude; and give thanks to God for all that you have received.