

Sermon, Year C
Proper 21, September 29, 2007
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I have been reading much about our new home, here in the Pacific Northwest. One of the fine books I have finished that I highly recommend is *The Good Rain*, by Timothy Egan. In it he has a chapter or two about Fred Beckey, someone new to me, but perhaps not to you, who lived in West Seattle, where I choose to reside, and who was one of the greatest hikers and mountain climbers anywhere. Becky sounded like a rather complex soul. Rare ones often are. Egan quotes Becky as saying to him once, "Loveliness is paid for in the currency of suffering." Loveliness is paid for in the currency of suffering. That may sum up in one line the point of much of what we have been given today in our Scripture.

I must say that these readings were just startling to me, when I thought about the fact that I had requested to be with you, on this day. All this talk of deeds, and buildings, it is quite interesting. I might as well be honest with you right from the start. I know this is on your mind, even if you wish it weren't. I want you to know it's on mine as well.

Equally profound is the fact that just days ago I was in New Orleans, amidst the rubble that is still the legacy of Hurricane Katrina. My first visitation as a Bishop was to be at our sister parish there, St. Paul's, New Orleans, and at my request, my first here in this diocese, is here, with you.

And, as is so often the case, all of that comes together in this moment, this one, where we have the ancient voices of our Scriptures telling us once again, that as much as we can see that has changed, much has stayed the same. It is interesting for me to note that Hurricane Katrina

and the exile you have experienced occurred at about the same time, only a few weeks apart. Two years ago.

The passages we have today are not there to point to some other time. . This is how we do an injustice to Scripture and our tradition quite frankly. You see I believe we typically read Scripture in one of two ways, both very different, both needed, but often only one utilized.

The first is to use Scripture as a window, the parables become a window in which we look to see how it was then. It is very easy to get locked into this view only. When we do, it can easily lead to judgment without our even realizing it.

We can look back and judge the people then to be naïve, or backward, or even worse, just plain stupid. Equally troublesome, some use Scriptures as a window and make no allowance for the experience we have since. This stance is really to look and say that revelation is static, given then, when the story was recorded, and never again. This too is quite dangerous.

The other view is to use Scripture as a mirror; to read the story and to have it reflect back on us; to see ourselves in the Scripture, to sense how the story we read is my story, our story. The mirror can be dangerous too. If we persist in the naval gazing of how it all pertains to me, or even us, without taking in the experience of our Christian brothers and sisters who have journeyed before us, then we become trapped in our time, and as much as we might not want to admit it, our time has its challenges and blind spots too.

It is really best when we use the Scripture both ways, as a window and as a mirror. First, looking to what was, and what the ancients learned and left to us, and then as a mirror, a reflection that calls us to be all we are called to in God. We need both for this enterprise, this journey we are on, to work.

This is how this Gospel for today is often misread. If we see it only as a window then it becomes little less than a description of heaven, intended to give details of what the furniture in heaven will be like, or what the temperature of Hell might be. What we might glean from the story as a window is that the wish for heaven, and the attempt to understand it, was just as real for them as it is for us, and just as unclear as well.

As a mirror, we might see this as a call for us in this day to stop worrying so much about such things.

We are not in control of heaven or hell; those are God's whatever they may be. We do not have to look through the window today and buy every idea our forbears believed or thought. Instead, we should look through the window, learn what they thought, pick up the mirror and envision for ourselves a life, not after death, but before death. Yes, life *before* death. Life after death will take care of itself, but we have to learn how to live our lives now. This is often missed.

To live Scripture as only law, is to be in the place of Lazarus, it is to be lost already, it is a death while still having a heartbeat. All of these passages today are about living the Kingdom, building it, acting into it, today. As one teacher said, "What is in our control is how we live our lives, for which we have God's own teaching and the example of God's own son." The rest is not in our control, as interesting as it all might be.

You have had a difficult time this last two years, and yet today, we come together to celebrate. We Christians are odd that way. Flannery O'Connor once said, "you shall know the truth, and the truth will make you odd." And I think that is so true.

We are odd as Christians in that, in death we celebrate life, we don't dwell on death. We are always looking and believing in resurrection, for it is our story.

You decided to live. For that I am so very grateful. I am grateful for you on behalf of this diocese. What you have done has not been easy. You, I know, would not have chosen it if you had a choice. I would suspect those meeting in the other building would say the same. This is not about demonizing anyone, but instead of living into what our Scriptures for today are about, to live life now the best we can.

The people of New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast would not have chosen their lives these last two years either. Yet, as I said in my letter this past week, being a veteran visitor of New Orleans I do believe, in many ways, the town is happier, more hospitable, and more appreciative than ever before. They would not have chosen it, but they have taken it, what they were handed, and have made the best of it.

We have many stories today before us, from all the generations of the faith as it has been lived and walked. We do not know all that the future holds but holding each other, walking with each other through whatever comes is certainly a rich heritage for you and I to leave to the next generations. You are to be commended for it.

The Christians in 1 Timothy seemed to look at their past in both ways, as a window and a mirror, and by so doing were able to prescribe for their community ...this,

They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Thanks for taking hold of life here, you show us that which really is life. Yes, you have paid in the currency of suffering, but your journey is an example to us, your fellow travelers, a reflection from the mirror of Scripture where we are called to create the Reign of God even today.

I hope you will stop to celebrate today, your conviction, your persistence, your holy patience, the inspiring reflection you are to us, your loveliness. What a gift you are! Thank you!