

18th Sunday After Pentecost – October 8, 2017

Philippians 3:4b-14 (2:1-13) and Matthew 21:33-46

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm going to ask you some very personal questions right now. They're rhetorical questions so don't shout out your answers. But do answer silently to yourself, and do try to be honest. I want to ask you about your identity. Who are you? How do you define yourself? More importantly, what makes you special? What do you take pride in?

One of the most important ways people tend to define themselves is by the groups they belong to. Probably one of the ways you define yourself, for instance, is by your nationality. Another way you probably define yourself is as a Christian. Maybe, if you're like me, your denominational affiliation is an important part of your identity. And what better time to identify as a Lutheran than the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Martin Luther was our guy!

But then again, I'm a third-generation Lutheran pastor, and my family on both sides was Lutheran for many generations before that. For me, for a good chunk of my early life, there was in that Lutheran identity an implicit comparison of myself and my Lutheran tribe with others. We had gotten Christianity right.

Many of you don't have that kind of pedigree, so maybe you're not quite so heavily invested. But maybe you have other ways of compare yourself favorably with others. How is it that you do that? What are the comparisons you make? Are you smarter than most people you know? Are you more talented? Better looking? Taller? Thinner? And if don't feel that you're more naturally-gifted than most, at least you're more civilized, or more cultured, or maybe just friendlier, more down to earth. Or maybe you take pride in being more well-off than others financially.

Ok, I think by now you have the idea of what I'm asking. Hold that thought now – save that file – because I want to come back to it, after we take a moment to consider today's readings.

Like you and me, the church people of Jesus' day tended to define themselves in exclusive terms, and took comfort in believing that they were better than others outside the church. Of course I'm speaking a little anachronistically here, because of course the church as we know it did not yet exist. But as I've pointed out before, it's very important when we read about Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Elders, the Chief Priests, and the Scribes, that we not immediately think that he's dealing with *those* bad people, you know, the Jews. We Christians have a long and fraught history of doing just that, and of thus depriving ourselves of much of the meaning of these passages. It is much more helpful, I think, to identify ourselves with the Jewish community of which Jesus was a part, and to accept Jesus' criticism of them as criticism also of us. The assumption on the part of many in this pre-church church was that since they were the chosen people, the people of the covenant, that was enough. They were righteous by default, by birth, just by being born to the right parents. And for some reason they assumed that not much more was expected of them, except maybe keeping the commandments in a superficial way and observing the rituals of their religion. They figured that as long as they were doing those things they didn't really have to act any differently from anyone else in their daily lives, despite God's covenant and a long line of prophets telling them otherwise. That, says Jesus in our Gospel reading, is like a vineyard that doesn't yield any fruit. But the Israelites, the people of the covenant, were chosen for a purpose: to be in relationship with God and to be a blessing to all the nations of the Earth. There wasn't anything intrinsically better about Abraham in comparison other people when God called him to be the father of a great nation. God presumably could have called someone from China or sub-Saharan Africa. That God singled out Israel to be the chosen people was an act of pure grace, nothing more or less.

Then, as we heard last week, centuries later in Jesus' time – and again by God's grace – people who were usually considered unrighteous and even unclean in Jewish society – tax collectors and prostitutes – were listening to God's messenger, John the Baptist; they were repenting, turning to God, having a change of heart and a change of mind. Buds are turning up in some very unexpected places, not on the healthy-looking vines, but on the ones that look like they needed to be cut off. At the same time, people who were usually considered righteous pillars of the community, the ones who observed all the prescribed rituals and laws and who kept the commandments, were rejecting those whom God has sent. What looked like healthy vines showed no sign that they will bear their expected fruit.

OK, now fast forward to the 21st century. Retrieve that file you saved just a minute ago, the one with all the things that make you special, and better than everyone else. What are you going to do with that? What will you do with your American citizenship? What will you do with your good taste and your socio-economic status? What will you do with your talented, good-looking, civilized, friendly, down-to-earth, church-going self? Well, you might be expecting me to tell you that you need to renounce all that, to consider it rubbish, as Paul says in our second reading, but that's not where I'm going with this. Instead I'm going stick with that same reading and remember that it's a continuation of last week's second reading that I passed over in relative silence – even though it's one of the most significant texts in all of the Bible. I want to recall the question I asked of the children not too long ago, not “What *Would* Jesus Do?” but “What *did* Jesus Do?” Jesus has something that makes him vastly superior to other people—way better than supermodel looks, impeccable taste, bags of money, and your favorite citizenship all combined. Jesus has divinity to brag about. He is God! But what *did* Jesus do with *that*? Well, he didn't reject his divinity, but as Paul says in last week's reading from Philippians: “though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.” And Paul advises us to have the same attitude, the same “mind” as Christ. By all means, thank God for the blessings that you have, value those blessings, and make good use of them, but by no means exploit them for your own personal advantage, or to exalt yourself above others, even if it's only in your mind. Having the mind or attitude of Christ means emptying yourself of the self-serving advantages that your blessings might be exploited for. Paul says it even better: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

Now, before you close that file again with the list of things that make you special, I want you to add one more thing to it, if it's not already there. And I want you to put it at the top of the list. Put “Child of God – sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” Those are baptismal words, the same words spoken over Agnes Jo Meyer two weeks ago, words that say that God has claimed us for his own. And that is what makes you truly special, even if it doesn't make you better than anyone else. Because God has claimed you, forgiven you, sealed you with the Holy Spirit, and marked you with the cross of Christ forever, you are not alone in this life. Nor do you have to fear that you do not have the faith or the strength to bear the fruit that is expected of you, for again as Paul tells us, “it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” God himself! At work in you! Now that's really something to take pride in. May God grant us grace to trust that astounding promise, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.