

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
The Rev. James Lee Walker

10-01-06

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

Psalms 19:7-10

James 4:7-12

When I was in college back in the winter of January and February of 1969, the hippie movement was all ablaze at the University of Texas where I was a student. I had gotten much involved in it. I ended up living in a commune, basically, which started out as a sort of simple ramshackle old two bedroom apartment a few of us moved into because the rent was so low. It was in a very ratty run-down part of town down south of the campus. This place was so old, even back in 1969 that in the hallway, which had never been painted, you could still see where students over the years had written phone numbers on the wall above a little niche in the hallway which had the only telephone jack in it. A lot of the numbers written had only four digits; it was that old.

Well, it being the late 1960's and I being sort of in my hippie kind of phase, there were four of us living in the two bedroom apartment and a friend who had gotten thrown out of his apartment wanted to sleep on the couch. Well sure, we let that happen and then he had a friend who wanted to come stay there for a while who said I'll just put out a sleeping bag on the floor. By the time January had rolled around in 1969, I was one of thirty-two people living in a two-bedroom apartment. At one point I decided I wasn't sure if this is the most conducive environment for someone studying for the Priesthood. I decided I needed to get out of this situation because there were drugs, there was no place to sleep, people were stealing food; it was a bad situation. So I called my mom and my dad to see if I could get a little more money to get a place of my own until the summer.

Mom and dad had pretty much paid my way through college; I worked while I was in college as a waiter, but not out of need, it was more to have extra money and live in a better place or have some spending money, but now I needed some money to get a separate apartment. I rehearsed this phone call and I rehearsed this phone call because I was so worried that Dad was really going to be so mad at me and disappointed and scream and yell and I'd be in trouble and all that. I called Dad up and he kind of stumbled around at first in our conversation as I'm starting into this and then he started listening, and basically what he started saying to me was: "Are you okay? I want you to be okay." "Yes, Dad I'm okay." "What do you need, we'll help you out with whatever you need."

We got it all settled up and I hung up. I thought Dad had sounded a little strange. A few hours later I called back and Mom answered the phone and I said: “You know what’s happened?” She said “Yes, your father just told me all about it.” I said: “Well, Dad sounded a little funny when he was talking to me on the phone. Is he mad at me about asking for help and money?” She said: “Oh no dear. He’s delighted to be able to help you. He really is. He was just a little confused because when he picked up the phone and heard your voice he thought you were calling to wish him a happy birthday.”

Well, you can imagine. I felt about this high off the top of this pulpit. But it struck me as such an icon in a sense of what we read about in the Book of Numbers today. The people of Israel out in the desert complaining; just like I was out in my own personal little desert of my own creation and I’m calling up Dad saying, in effect, “Meet my needs. I am the center of the universe. Take care of me. Bail me out. I’m in pain.” I wasn’t thinking anything at all about having the concern and courtesy to say, “Hey Dad, how’s your day? What’s going on with you?”

Now think of the people of Israel as we see them in today’s reading. I used to think even when I was a little kid and saw the movie The Ten Commandments, how can they see the Nile turn to blood, fire falling like hail out of the heavens, how can they see the Red Sea parted and the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud, how can they see all of this and still complain and still lose their faith?

Of course, it’s easy for me to criticize them, but what of me and my lack of faith? What of the miracles I see and ignore? I watched the sun come up this morning. I’ve seen babies be born in real life. I’ve watched the flowers bloom. How can I see all that and still complain?

No, I’ve never seen the Red Sea part. I’ve never seen a pillar of fire or a pillar of smoke leading me through a desert. But I have seen wonders the ancient Israelites would have marveled to see. It is really a possibility that I might see a cure for cancer before I die. I sat and watched live television pictures of men walking on the Moon. I have looked, though I stand here on earth, through the eye of a telescope circling over my head in outer space which can see back to the beginning of the universe through the light that it captures from billions of years ago. I have seen under a microscope the tiny microscopic animals that live inside my body or in a drop of pond water. How can I see all these things and still complain? Well, ask my Dad. Dad knows how I can.

Have you ever wondered sometimes what God must feel like when we get in touch with Him? Just like my Dad that day, how he must of felt. Oh, Dad was overjoyed to be able to help me, but you know, I think things changed for us later when I finally got to a point with Dad where I could say: “This man who is my father is also one of my very closest best friends.” As I became older, I started thinking about Dad’s side of the relationship. I got to thinking when I got older about how Dad describes me to other people, when they say: “Your son was visiting this weekend, how was that?” Does he say: “I thought Lee’s visit would *never* end?” Or does he say: “All I could think about was I’m so glad to have Lee here, or he made me laugh, or I was worried about the way he looked.” How did Dad feel in our relationship?

I go to God all the time to tell God all sorts of stuff about me that He already knows. How rarely do I say to God: “And how are you?” Well of course you look at me and say: “Well he’s God, he’s got to be okay.” Yes, I could shake my fist at God, I could curse God, I could turn my back on Him and it’s not going to destroy God. He’s not going to have to go into therapy or anything like that. But Christians know that it’s a love relationship we have with God. Even though you’re strong enough to bear it, even though you’re wise enough to understand that one day that little child that you gave birth to will grow up and know better, it can still hurt when one of your kids or one of your adult friends has a temper tantrum or a screaming fit and is so concerned about their own hurt and need and cares nothing for you. If you really love them how does that make you feel to be ignored in that way?

I think the ancient People of Israel, just like me, forgot so often to care about God. We complain about the way life is because it’s not meeting our expectations. We complain that we don’t have enough to eat. Or we have enough to eat but it isn’t *what* we want to eat, or it isn’t fixed the way we like it. We complain that we don’t have enough clothing or that our clothes are all out of style. We sit around sometime and think: “I was born; life owes me a living; how come things aren’t as good as I think they ought to be for me?” We forget that where we ought to be starting is by saying to God and our own souls, “What an incredible gift life is.” We forget the holiness of the place to which we were called to live and exist, this world.

I was at a party at my parents’ house one time and overheard a woman talking to my parents who said: “What a lovely home. Everything seems to be so perfect. Did you build this place yourselves?” “Oh, yes,” said Mom and Dad. “We worked with an architect, designed it; it’s the third house we’ve built; they’ve all

been pretty much the same, but each time we fine tune each thing that was wrong in the previous one and we think we've really got it right now." The woman said: "Obviously you've put a lot of work and thought into this house."

Later that night, after the party, I was sitting out in the back yard looking at the stars. Back in those days you could still see the stars in the Houston suburbs. I was looking up at the stars and listening to the wind in the pine trees. It was the seventeen year cycle of the cicadas and I was listening to them. I suddenly thought to myself: Oh Lord God my creator, you've put a lot of work and thought into this house we call the Created Order, the Universe."

This world is a sacred and holy place. Before we start complaining, we ought to start with: "Thank you so much for the privilege of being here. What would you like me to do, oh Lord?" And the Lord basically says to us: "I would like you to pay attention to my instructions and my precepts for you, because if you'll do what I tell you, you'll enjoy it more than any other way."

Moses called people to help him prophesize. Jesus, in the Gospels, tells John: "Even if there is one who is not part of the twelve, if they are casting out demons in My Name, they are with us because they are calling on my name." How often did I as a strict Episcopalian in the Anglo-Catholic tradition, turn around and look and doubt or criticize somebody who was prophesying, who was bringing souls to Jesus, who was telling the truth of the Lord in this world simply because they weren't doing it according to my Episcopal traditions? I would think to myself: "Tsk, tsk, tsk. They don't have Episcopal ordination. What is the matter with these people? They're Presbyterians. They're Baptists. They're not like me. They're not Episcopalians. And yet, God is prophesying through them and I forget many of them were looking at me and saying the same thing! No; we shouldn't worry about whether or not they fit into the way that we think things should be. What we consider is this: "Is this person serving and declaring and prophesying about Jesus Christ?"

In the last several months with our visioning process and planning for where the church is going, I've had people out of curiosity, out of concern, out of anxiety or nervousness, who have looked at me and have said: "Where is our church going? Where is the parish going? Where is the national church going? Where is the Anglican Communion going?" I have tried most of my life to give very comforting yet truthful and profound answers to such questions. However, now I've come to the point where I stop and I think about the people of God where Moses said: "Would that all God's people were Prophets." Now I answer people

who ask where the church is going by saying, “I don’t know. It’s *your* church. Where are *you* going to take it?” It’s your parish, People. If you don’t like the direction its going, you’re one of the people who is a minister in this church. Stand up and be heard. If you have an idea that you think ought to be tried, bring it before the Lord and try it. Do it, don’t just discuss it. Remember that you have been called to an incredibly holy place. Remember before you go complaining to God to give Him thanks for the great privilege simply of being here. Thank Him for the joy of being here.

I saw something that caught my attention on the TV news this morning as I was getting ready for this sermon. It was a story about a new program that’s being done in refugee camps for people who are coming to the United States. I’ve been sitting here thinking about remodeling my kitchen this week and very sad and depressed that I don’t have enough money to get everything that I want in my kitchen. You know what the new program is for the refugees? They now go through special courses to teach them how *not* to get fat when they come to America because we have too much food and people who live in cultures that don’t have enough food don’t know how to handle such abundance.

In a similar way, we American Christians often don’t seem to know how to handle the abundance of gifts and grace we have received from God. We often take it for granted and simply become blind to all the wonder around us. It’s your church. It’s your life. It’s all a holy and wonderful gift from God. Stand up and be part of it, for as Moses said: “Oh, would that all God’s People were Prophets!”