

## SIGN LANGUAGE

### Pentecost 15, Year A – Exodus 16:2-15, Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-6

In my imagination, Oliver Hardy was the people's representative in today's First Reading. He says to Stan Laurel's Moses, "This is a fine mess! You've brought us out into this wilderness to kill us all with hunger!" Of course Stan has nothing to say, although the sad expression on his face says volumes; but we know it will only be a couple of seconds before that same face will light up in joy and he'll raise the "I've got it" finger of his right hand as he comes up with a new plan which will end in a much bigger mess than the first one.

I have no idea whether or not today's First Reading is supposed to be amusing, but knowing something of human nature, it's difficult for me not to smile both at the repeated references to the people's complaining and at Moses' repeated deflection, "What are we, that you complain against us?"

Some wonderful things happen, though: each evening quail miraculously appear, providing meat for the people; and in the morning, when the dew lifts, there is a white substance which may have been a carbohydrate-rich excretion of insects who feed on the twigs of the tamarisk tree. We really don't know what it was, nor did the Israelites – the word "manna" which is often used to describe their so-called "bread from heaven" means "what is it?" But the daily provision of quail and manna in the wilderness, the timely appearance in the sky of a luminous cloud (considered to be the glory of God), and later, the provision of water from rocks were, through the eyes of faith, *signs* of God's care and God's presence. Without question, the people of Israel were in a fine mess, but having enough food and water when they were in the middle of nowhere meant, first of all, that the people would not die, and second, that God had remained faithful to them.

We all need signs from time to time of God's care and presence and faithfulness; and it is in passages such as this one that we begin to build a vocabulary for faith. The care, presence, and faithfulness of God looks like enough food and water in time of scarcity; a response in time of need when the need has been identified; and then accompaniment as we walk through the wilderness – whatever that wilderness might be.

Our Gospel, today, also contains a sign – a sign that is offensive, we read, because it speaks, Jesus tells us, of God's world more accurately than it does of our world. In many ways, it is a world beyond us.

Early in my ministry here, one of our members explained to me how our world works. He had been amazingly successful in his professional life brokering deals and promoting partnerships; and so he spoke with authority. He said, "Everything we do is a transaction. You do something for me, and I do something for you. If you have something that I want, I need to find out what it is that I have that you need. You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours." I was saddened by our conversation. He was a cradle Lutheran, and he was telling me that the grace of God was so much foolishness. At the same time, I was grateful for his insight, because it illuminated for me passages like today's parable of The Labourers in the Vineyard. In a world in which everything is a transaction, the workers who worked from early in the morning to just before sundown were dealt with unjustly by the landowner. The landowner says to them, "Too bad, friends. We had an agreement, and I honoured the agreement." But they cannot get past that the landowner paid the same amount of money as they received to those who worked from five o'clock in the afternoon to just before sundown. In the world of transactions, there are equations: those who work one hour should not be paid the same as those who work ten. And so, Jesus, by telling this parable, teaches another truth that does not reflect the world as we know and experience it. God's world, he explains, is not only a generous world, but also a world without a worthiness quotient. God's world is not a world of gold medalists and runners-up: the grace and love of God are not given as merit pay.

There is a lovely vision in Isaiah's prophecy of the exiles' return to their homeland. After 70-plus years of being strangers in a strange land, the prophet sees in his imagination their return to a place in which the generosity and graciousness and hospitality of God prevail. The prophet writes, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the water; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." Generosity, graciousness, and hospitality are signs of the kingdom of heaven we learn here and in Jesus' parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard. Our tethers to the world of

transaction are cut, and we are released to discover our freedom in God to have love, compassion, and mercy for one another; to live as the very people of God.

It was at our Council retreat in May of 2013 that we hit on the idea of a community barbecue and partners fair. Retreat leader Nancy Kelly responded at the retreat to the questions we had concerning mission and ministry. It was easy to look at what she and others had accomplished through the St. Mark's Lutheran-Calvary United Downtown Ministry over the years, and to feel that Christ, Waterloo had somehow missed the boat.

And so, she took us through an exercise. From memory, she had us draw maps of the church and its neighbourhood; and then we compared our individual maps – both the things we had included, and the things we had left out. The point of the exercise was to determine who were our neighbours and to assess our relationship with those neighbours. We knew some of them through our existing ministries at Pinehaven Seniors Residence and at Sandowne School – our after-school program; but for the most part, we discovered that we didn't know our neighbours, and ventured that they probably didn't know us either.

And so, the idea of a community barbecue came about through the workshop Nancy led, and through our brainstorming together. And I'm not sure at what point we decided to make the barbecue completely free – it wouldn't be a fund-raiser, it wouldn't be a pot=luck – but *that* thought found amazing resonance. Perhaps Isaiah 55, verse 1, was somewhere back there in our collective consciousness; or perhaps the idea of Eucharist informed our decision. I don't know exactly how it came about, but I remember the delight everyone had our agreement not to charge admission. And really, there was and is no transaction: it's not the soft-sell for new members; we're not really promoting anything other than our desire to be a full member of the community. And I like to think that the people who do make monetary donations or donations-in-kind do so because they want to ensure that there are still times when and places where you can have a free lunch. We've all been told many, many times, that there is such thing as a free lunch. Well, there is now; and as humble a banquet of hamburgers, hot dogs, a cookie and a soft drink is, it is nothing less than a whole-community celebration at which people come together, come closer to one another, begin new relationships and friendships, and find affirmation. The kingdom of heaven looks like this. All are welcome, and there is enough for all.

And so, I began to think that perhaps our community barbecue was a sign – of generosity, graciousness, mercy, and hospitality – a noticeable, maybe even a conspicuous sign in a world of transactions, equations, and quotients. And that maybe it's a sign for us as much as it is a sign for others – a sign that we need to recognize and reflect upon in evaluating our whole mission and ministry as the people of God in Christ Jesus.

Can we take these same kingdom values to the streets to make generosity, graciousness, mercy, and hospitality something others experience on our watch – especially those who are hungry, without homes, without employment, unable to work because of disabilities, without enough income from government pensions to live with dignity? In a world in which everything is a transaction, they lose. How can we change this? How can we, as Paul says, "live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ?"