

## TIMELY OR PERENNIAL?

### **Pentecost 16, Year B – Pro. 31:10-31; Jas. 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8; Mk. 9:30-37**

One of the books we use in our Confirmation classes is Daniel Erlander's *Manna and Mercy*. *Manna and Mercy* is a deftly selective survey of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments – selective in order to support scripturally some of the central teachings of Martin Luther concerning the nature of God. Our confirmands love Erlander's books – he's written several. They love them not only because of his whimsical hand-drawn illustrations, but also because he writes well, expressing his ideas with words and phrases that are both unique to Erlander and effective in making a point. For example, he describes people with a lot of power and wealth as Big Deals. And he uses the experience of the Old Testament's Hebrew people, first as slaves in Egypt and second as those whom God instructed in what Erlander calls The Wilderness School, as two contrasting examples of life in community.

When the Hebrew people suffered slavery in ancient Egypt, Erlander sees them as subject to the Big Deals – Pharaoh and the Egyptian nobility. And he illustrates the hierarchy with Pharaoh at the top and the Hebrew slaves on the bottom using – you guessed it – a drawing of an Egyptian pyramid! At the top of the pyramid are a very few people with great wealth and absolute power; at the bottom of the pyramid are thousands of Hebrew slaves with neither wealth nor power!

In contrast with society in ancient Egypt, Erlander explains how, when the slaves escaped Egypt and sojourned in the wilderness for many years, they experienced something new: in God's gift of manna, a kind of high-protein daily bread that appeared on the ground early in the morning and could not be hoarded without spoiling, the people learned something about equality and justice as the will of God.

God's world is not a world of Big Deals and Little Deals, in which the Big Deals have all the power and wealth and the Little Deals have nothing: no, God's world is a world in which everyone receives enough of whatever they need to live happily and comfortably with others. It's the "manna" part of the Erlander's book title, *Manna and Mercy*. "Manna" signifies "equality and justice." Although the people complained bitterly to Moses while they were without a permanent homeland – the Bible says that they spent 40 years in the wilderness – they were never hungry or thirsty. There was the manna that appeared in the early hours of each day; there were the quail that somehow arrived each evening; and there was water which sprang from the rocks. Always enough, but with no option for anyone rising to a place of privilege.

"The Wilderness School," Erlander calls it: a place and a time where a whole generation of God's people learned from experience that life is better when equality and justice are the order of the day. The Ten Commandments, which the people also received in The Wilderness School, also taught equality and justice. God's law seeks to protect people from those who want to seize power and property or allow their appetites free rein at the expense of another's happiness and wellbeing: "you shall not covet and then steal, you shall not kill, you shall not destroy your marriage or another's by being unfaithful or causing another spouse to be unfaithful; you shall not lie." the wisdom of God for living peaceably and equitably in community in ten simple laws. The theological point in all of The Wilderness School's instruction is that *God* practises equality and justice, and the *people of God* are to do the same!

Leap forward in Biblical time to today's Gospel, and we hear Jesus musing on the same point in a different context and with a different illustration. According to Mark, Jesus has told the disciples for the second time that the wisdom of God will somehow be revealed through his own suffering, death, and resurrection. Mark writes that the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying; and as if to confirm their inability to take in what Jesus was trying to tell them, Mark writes that as they walked to Capernaum they were arguing with each other concerning which of them was the greatest of Jesus' disciples. Simply from the amount of print they receive in the gospels, we can imagine Peter, Andrew, James, John, and perhaps Thomas were the debaters. Did Jesus' reference to the future prompt their discussion? Were they testing the parameters of a succession plan? We don't know, really. Mark's gospel is wonderful in not saying too much. We do know, however, that the disciples certainly got Jesus' attention. "Come into my office," he effectively says to them; "we need to talk." And then, very gently, but very clearly, he takes Erlander's Egyptian pyramid and turns it upside down. We'll call this The Jesus School. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant all," he teaches them. Mark continues, "Then he took a little child and put it among them; and [then] taking [the child] in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent

me.” Children had no status or power in the society in which they lived. If your game is power and privilege, Jesus teaches his disciples, you’re not really in the game in God’s world. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant all.” Power and privilege are anathema to God. Somehow, discipleship in Jesus’ name, he says, must be the corrective for hierarchy: the end of God’s wisdom for life in community is equality and justice, not power and privilege – a ruling class and an underclass.

We struggle with this teaching – and that’s the truth. We love the idea of democracy and the power we have together as the community of the electorate, for example, to choose those who will administer the affairs of society for a four-year term, but the results of the exercise rarely, if ever, resemble the excellence imagined in the wisdom of either The Wilderness School or The Jesus School. Theory and practice do not align perfectly. And if we take a step back and consider our place in the world economy, the people of Canada and the other member nations of the G-7 countries are the ruling class. Our world is Pharaoh’s Egypt; our world actually rewards, it seems, those who play and win the game of power and privilege and value being the greatest.

But, of course, it’s not working. Wherever equality and justice fail, there is suffering, there is misery, there is violence and war, people are forced to leave their homes in order to find safety. And because we are people of conscience, because the wisdom of God calls to us, if not from the pages of the Bible, if not from the pages of world history books, perhaps when the cries and images of those who suffer so profoundly from violence, hunger, displacement, and poverty break into our comfort and disturb our peace, we remember the call of the gospel to, as Jesus says, “be servant of all;” to be people for others.

I’m not convinced that we’ll ever get it right all of the time; but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try and try harder to bring near the reign of God in every circle in which we have power or influence, voice, or vote. If we have gifts that can further the cause of equality and justice in our society and in the world, the wisdom of God calls us to use those gifts to help right some of the wrongs that cause undeserved suffering in our sisters and brothers. If we have the opportunity to lead, the wisdom of God bids us to be servant leaders, summoning all our skill to create something better than Pharaoh’s Egypt. If we have the opportunity to provide refuge for those in need of the support we can provide, the wisdom of God calls to us.

In the coming days, weeks and months, we, the people of God at Christ Lutheran Church, Waterloo, will have many opportunities to set the course or reset the course for ourselves and others. Today’s Gospel and the wise counsel from today’s reading from the Book of James are timely messages. But they are also *released* from the particularity of the Federal election, and the welcoming of Syrian refugees, and the calling of a new pastor. The wisdom of God is perennial, and our discipleship in Christ Jesus is perennial. It is also essential for the saving of the world. Equality and justice; servant leadership; dying and rising; losing our life in order to save it; the wisdom of God; the call of the gospel.