



Church of St. John the Evangelist, Elora
September 24 2023 - Seventeenth Sunday
after Pentecost
Canon Paul Walker

This week is Truth and Reconciliation Awareness week in Canada culminating on Saturday with National Truth and Reconciliation Day. It is an opportunity for us as a church and as Canadians to learn, grow and lament the legacy of residential schools in Canada. To that end, much like the orange ribbon campaign and the orange shirt day with the message, “Every Child Matters”, the Knitters and Quilters have made over 300 weather-resistant cloth feathers, largely around the colour of orange. Today you are invited to attach one or more feathers to some netting and in so doing remember one or more children who did not return home, and declare your intention to learn more. The collection of all these feathers will create a visible public memorial to these children that will be installed this week over the outside doors of the church and express our commitment to learn. Next Saturday the church will be open for you to come inside, reflect and pray.

It may not be astonishing, but it is, that after such grand acts of deliverance through the passover and exodus, the people of God, freed from slavery, now are filled with complaints claiming that Moses and Aaron have brought them out into the wilderness to

die of hunger. Would it not have been better that we died in Egypt where at least we had bread to eat?

It’s amazing how looking back through the lens of nostalgia can create an understanding that convinces us that we were better off back there. We may have been slaves, but at least we had our daily bread.

You can’t blame them for complaining. Their family and friends were dying of hunger. So of course looking back to the days of slavery seemed a lot better, because it was.

They complained to Moses and Aaron. Moses and Aaron replied by saying “Don’t blame us, blame God!” Appropriately, Moses and Aaron did not want to become the containers and the targets for this anger. After all, it wasn’t their idea to smear the doorposts with the blood of the lamb so the angel could “pass over” their households, or to cross over the Red Sea on dry ground and see their captors behind them swallowed up by the water and washed up dead on the sea shore. None of that was their idea or doing. It was God’s act, so blame God! And so they did.

It is worth noting in the scriptures, particularly in the psalms, how much God gets blamed for things. God becomes the appropriate container and target when things go wrong. Because the underlying question is why would God bring us out here to die in the wilderness?

Like in the parable of the generous landowner. What kind of landowner would pay the *same* wage to those who worked only *one* hour as those who had born the heat of the day and worked *all* day? Don't the workers who had worked all day *deserve* more? It's not fair that they have been made equal to those who worked only one hour.

The landowner responds, "Take what belongs to you and go; I chose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or (*and here is the key question*) are you envious because *I am generous?*"

The reaction of those who worked all day may have been disdain, anger and envy; but the reaction of those who had worked only one hour would have been complete disbelief. How you perceive the landowner depends on when you were hired.

The next day, *no one* would have signed up at the beginning of the day, and if they did they would have negotiated something with a conditional clause about proportional raises if other workers were hired. Otherwise, you would be running to get to the end of the line, not to the front, because that is the most favoured position.

The landowner is more interested in those at the end of the line. Jesus was more interested in the tax collector and sinner, the leper and blind, the lame and

the lost, the condemned and the dead. It was upon these that the "year of the Lord's favour" would shine.

Out of an abundance of seeming endless resources this landowner is seen by those at the end of the line as exceptionally generous.

All of us have been at the end of the line. And if you haven't, you will be there. All of us have felt a sense of being overlooked for the team, forgotten by the teacher or parent, lost in the wilderness, and justifiably angry with God asking, "Why would you bring us out here in the wilderness to die? Weren't we better off as slaves?"

Give us this day our daily bread.

The prodigal son acknowledged he was no longer worthy to be called a "son", but before he had the chance to say "make me like one of your hired slaves", the father embraced him and wept. Then the father said, "Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Kill the fatted calf and let us celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found, *he was at the end of the line and now he is first.*" When you are at the end of the line, when you are dying in the wilderness, when you are forgotten and lost, that is precisely the place where God shows up. So run to the end of the line. For the last will first, and the first will be last.