

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Septuagesima
Exodus 17:1-7
February 20, 2011

In Harper Lee's classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the character Atticus Finch calls to mind an old "well known" adage when he says, "you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view – until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." Perhaps Harper Lee might have been thinking about what seems to be an old Native American saying, "To understand a person, you need to walk a mile in their shoes" when she wrote these words.

Maybe that's good advice for any of us. Doing so, or at least thinking about it, might help us to understand a situation or a particular circumstance from another person's point of view. For example, in our text for today, the Israelites grumbled against God. We might think; who has the right to get angry, say nasty things or even to slander the name of God to others? But what if you were in the shoes of the Israelites who were in the middle of a desert and had no water to drink? It says, "*The people quarreled with Moses and said, 'Give us water to drink.' And Moses said to them, 'Why did you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?'"*

And this was not the first grumbling. In the chapter prior to the text for today the Israelites were hungry and longing to be around the meat pots and the bread back in Egypt. It says in verse two, "*The whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness...*"

In the Gospel text appointed for this day Jesus tells a story of a few workers in a vineyard. At the beginning of the day, some of the workers agreed to work for a denarius. Later on in the day, more workers were recruited by the master of the house to work in the vineyard. The master paid the men who worked all day the denarius he promised. They grumbled at this wage because the men who were hired much later also got the same wage.

"To understand a person, you need to walk a mile in their shoes." This saying might have merit, but we don't have to walk a mile in the shoes of the Israelites to see and understand their attitude. We don't have to walk a mile in the shoes of the laborers in the vineyard to understand their beef. We get it. Or perhaps we get it because we can relate. We have been there. Maybe we have not been in a desert or in a vineyard but somewhere else where we feel as if we weren't being taken care of, or given an unfair shake. We get it and we understand that in chapter sixteen of Exodus, the people were hungry and that seems to be a legitimate gripe. In chapter seventeen we hear how the people were thirsty and that seems to be a legitimate gripe. We get it. I would be angry as well. I would do all sorts of grumbling if I got paid the same wage as someone else for doing more backbreaking work.

Justified legitimate grumbling, that's what we have here. Just put yourself in their shoes. You would have a beef about what happened as well. They have every right to gripe, to shout out against God, to even persecute the Lord's servants like the Israelites did to Moses. They have every reason to grumble – or do they?

Well, let's make sure we keep in mind what came first – a promise from God. When Moses was called to lead the people out of Egypt the Lord told him, "*I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians...*" The promise is that the Lord will deliver His people. And then it says a little later (Exodus 3), "*I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to a land ... flowing with milk and honey.*"

And not only these promises, but even a promise made in the Gospel parable for today. The master of the house promised the wage of one denarius and he delivered on that promise. That might not seem fair, but that was the promise. The master delivered on the promise.

And now here we are – in these shoes – walking that mile and so much more – in the times and circumstances of our lives. The negative circumstances of life cause us to cry out to God, “it’s not fair and I’m angry.” We feel as if God has not dealt with us fairly and that blame should be put at His doorstep. When we suffer misfortune, illness, the loss of a loved one, or some other human tragedy, we may even have moments of doubt that we even have a gracious God. He isn’t being fair to us because we are suffering.

Suffering is a result of sin and God never promises that you won’t suffer. As a matter of fact, He promises that you will suffer. With suffering comes the idea in our heads that God isn’t being fair to us – He isn’t filling a particular need. This is common and any of us can understand this. God even understands.

And in this place where we walk and grumble because the next person is getting more – or – I don’t seem to have enough – or – life is just not fair – our God delivers on His promises. The Lord heard the grumbling of the people of Israel and he told Moses to bang on a rock so they could have water. I want you to know that even if the people did not get water that day, the Lord was going to preserve His people. He makes good on His promises and His promise was to deliver His people – not to starve them or deprive them of hydration.

The Lord hears your grumbling. And whether we grumble or not, He makes good on His promises. Israel was hungry and thirsty. This hunger and thirst made them forget about the promise of God to preserve them. They forgot in their grumbling. This happens to us as well. Beloved in the Lord, never forget God’s promises to you. You may be hungry today – so to speak. You may be thirsty today – so to speak. But God promises to provide for you. And even though He doesn’t promise that you will never be hungry, that you will never be thirsty... He does promise that you will not go hungry or go thirsty (unto eternal life).

St. Paul says to the church in Corinth that the people of God all ate of the same spiritual food and drank from the same spiritual rock (1 Cor. 10:4). Jesus is the rock that signifies the rock in the desert that Moses would strike and water would flow. Just as from Jesus, the rock of their salvation, water would give them life. It gives us life. It gives life to small children like Juliette this morning as she receives a precious promise and gift of life given by water and the Word in Baptism. Don’t forget that it was from the side of Jesus, as He hung on the cross after His death, that water and blood flowed after the Roman soldier pierced His side to see if He was dead.

The water and the blood flows freely from our Savior to give you life. You will never go hungry – though you may get hungry. You will never go thirsty – though you may get thirsty. The promise of Jesus will be fulfilled because God keeps His promises. That’s the truth for the people during the time of Moses. That’s the promise for the people in the time of today.

To understand a person, you need to walk a mile in his shoes. Such a saying may be true. You are a Christian. Walk everyday in the shoes of Jesus. Know that your Jesus has walked in your shoes already. He knows you inside and out. He took it all with Him to the cross. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.