

St. Paul's Church Healdsburg
The Reverend Sally Hanes Hubbell
August 3, 2014; Proper 13, Year A

Texts: Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 16; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

I understand that everything went very well for the last two Sundays here with Bishop George in the pulpit of St. Paul's, while my family and I were on our rafting trip down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. I ran into Katie Murphy on Friday, and she spoke fondly of +George's ability to relate almost anything to scripture. I said that we would see today how I can relate the Grand Canyon to scripture. It's difficult not to think of life in Biblical terms at the bottom of the Grand Canyon.

First, I have to tell you a bit about our trip. With two other families, long time friends and neighbors from Colorado Springs, we took what was basically a motorized pontoon boat 227 miles down the Colorado River, first through Marble Canyon and then through the Grand Canyon proper, for eight days. We had no access to the world beyond our immediate experience – no phone, internet, texting, no electronic games for the kids, nor news of any sort from the world above the canyon walls. For long stretches every day, the only things vying for our attention were the river, sun, wind, rock faces, our own thoughts, and the company of our companions. It was a lovely experience – the kind of experience that has the potential to altar one's perspective on life all together. Seeing depth from the bottom of the Grand Canyon like that can bring a person to look at lots of things in a deeper way.

Visually, our trip was beautiful beyond description. Truly impressive is the grandeur of it all -- grand indeed. But what made a bigger impression on me were the little, tucked away side canyons that we were able to hike up into. These may have impressed me more because I wasn't expecting them. Sometimes up in these smaller canyons there are springs of clear water that make oases of lush vegetation, pristine and hidden in what is otherwise a harsh desert landscape. More than once, I had the impression of seeing what I imagine the Garden of Eden to have looked like. Repeatedly we were on the edge of paradise – the border at which verdant life exists along side desert. Almost every day we got off the boat to take hikes, some of them quite challenging and all entailing a sense of adventure and mystery as to where they would lead, into the nooks and crevices of hard rock that open into these hidden places. The reward was getting to play in waterfalls and streams of aqua blue water. We felt like children of God, playing in paradise.

The canyon base is pristine because its use is very carefully regulated. Of the millions of people a year who visit the Grand Canyon National Park at the rim, only about 80,000 get down to the bottom. Of those, a far smaller fraction travel through the whole canyon. Permits to navigate the river are handed out very sparingly through a complicated lottery process, and once in the canyon the behavior of visitors is heavily regulated. We left nothing behind, and saw almost no trace of anyone else. Before leaving a campsite we scoured it for what we learned to call "micro-trash," little bits of anything left behind, as it was clear others had done before we arrived. There is a dam up river from where we put in that regulates

water levels on a daily basis, but aside from that there is remarkably little sign of human presence. It's rare in this world to experience such wilderness – much less get to live in it for a week.

On the boat there were long stretches of quiet water, and our guides used that time to share stories of river runners and to talk about the history of the canyon and river, and about geology. We also shared poems and excerpts of books, and a lot of conversation. Our boatman was a man named Jed Koller, and early on in the trip we discovered a connection with him around two points: one was that he and David both spend time herding sheep in the same remote area on the Navajo Reservation, and the other was a common love for the writings of Wendell Berry.

A few days into the trip, as we were all talking about writers who have made impressions upon us, Jed shared his favorite Wendell Berry poem: “Oh, when all the world's at peace, and every man is free, then will I go down unto my love. Oh, and I may go down a few times before that.” I held my breath as he said it. I hadn't thought about that poem in a very long time, a decade at least, but there was a time when I had memorized it to keep within easy reach. Twenty-two years ago David and I included it in our wedding service – untraditional, I know. I don't think many people knew what to make of it, and I doubt we were able to articulate why we wanted it read. But we did. And here it was again.

By this point in the trip, I was feeling very full – mental and emotional fullness from being with people I love, aesthetic fullness from the breathtaking vistas staring me in the face every time I opened my eyes. The fullness that comes from recognizing the history of our lives that has made us who we are, and seeing how that history has woven us into the lives of others. The fullness that comes from seeing how our stories overlap and implicate us in more than we can see or understand at any given time. It's hard to be there in the canyon and not think about time and history and the story of the world that is made up of the experiences of every one of us. It is a place that forces perspective upon a person. I hadn't signed up for this trip to be a spiritual experience, but that's what it was.

One night we made camp on a ledge of flat rock that was tucked under a cliff with a rocky overhang to shield us from potential rain. I lay awake studying the cliff face on the opposite wall, watching bats dart about and clouds drift over stars, and the stars come out again. I thought about how the story of land in this country is essentially one of there not being enough of it. It's the story of one people pushing out another people -- a story of claims, encroachment, and resource exploitation. And then it occurred to me, that's pretty much the story about land all over the world, isn't it? Humans have been migrating around the globe for millennium, and most often pushing someone out of their way to do it. Just about every place considered valuable has people running all over it. Land is a limited resource, and most often the history of land usage is framed in terms of scarcity. Indeed, the lesson we learned in the canyon was that keeping any place pristine is dependent upon limiting and regulating its use. There are very few places where people are attentive to picking up their micro-trash. If you want land of your own to do what you want with, it's going to cost more than most people can afford.

And then it occurred to me as I lay there looking at the canyon walls, that the high cost of land is an important part of the story we read about in our Old

Testament passage for this morning. Jacob is going back home to the land he left as a young man. You may remember, when he left he was running from his brother Esau because he'd stolen their father's blessing and Esau's birthright as the eldest son. In our story this morning Jacob has been gone a long time and it's time for him to go back home, but he's afraid to face the consequences of what he's done; he's afraid his brother is going to kill him. And so, Jacob sends everyone else on ahead while he waits one more night on the other side of the river. I imagine that he's sent his family ahead to soften his brother's heart before he has to face him.

Today's scripture is the story of brothers operating on assumptions of scarcity when it comes to land and resources. So much of the history told to us in the Hebrew Scriptures is about the acquisition of land – it's about following the call of God into the "promised land," and it's about the effort to hang onto that land once they are there. And because of that, it's a story of struggle.

I find it hard to like Jacob. I've always felt sorry for his less clever, coarser brother. And interestingly, although Jacob goes on to be the great patriarch of the people of Israel, Esau is the true hero of this particular story, because when all is said and done he's able to forgive the wrong he's been done and embrace his brother. These Bible stories are a tricky business, and it can be hard to pin down who's the good guy and who's the bad, and whose side God is on. From the beginning God favored Jacob and never seemed to begrudge what he stole from his brother. But now, Jacob is undergoing what appears to be a very dark night of the soul, having to face not only his brother but also God himself. Jacob leaves the victor, but changed and forever limping. The price he pays in the end is high, and he will be forever in his brother's debt.

If it's true to say our Old Testament passage is a story of scarcity, it's even more evident that our Gospel story is one of abundance. Jesus takes five loaves of bread and two fishes, and feeds more than 5000 people. And there are twelve baskets of food left over. I've always wondered why so much food was left over. Symbolically, there is one basket for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, but doesn't it seem extravagant in this deserted countryside to have twelve baskets of food left over? On our rafting trip, we always had a lot of food left over from each meal, and we asked our guides why they made so much. They answered that there is a phenomenon that happens to people on trips like ours, called "food scared." If people see all the food getting eaten after each meal, at a gut level they get scared there isn't going to be enough and they start hoarding it. The solution is to make more than can possibly be eaten, which is what Jesus does in this story. The point is that with Jesus, there will always be plenty.

Abundance is with Jesus wherever he goes. There is an abundance of food, of compassion, of health. There is an abundance of freedom, because in the presence of Jesus there is nothing to fear, not even death. Do not fear, he says over and over again – there's enough; there's always enough. There's no need to fear, because I am enough. That's pretty much the Christian message in a nutshell, and in his ministry Jesus is repeatedly inviting people into this reality of his abundance.

And yet, even after Jesus has come into the world there is scarcity. That's a reality we would be foolish not to recognize. People go hungry. Land is fought over. Resources like water and unspoiled wilderness are limited. In theological terms,

this is described as the “already and not yet” nature of the kingdom of God. Jesus has come into the world and shown us the abundance of his presence, and he has proclaimed that the kingdom of God is in our midst, even here, even now. And yet, we wait for more. And yet we wait, because the cost of living is high.

This is what I thought about as I lay beneath that cliff.

And then the next day floating down the river, Jed shared that Wendell Berry poem: “Oh, when all the world’s at peace, and every man is free, then will I go down unto my love. Oh, and I may go down a few times before that.”

I understood then that this poem is an expression of the “already and not yet” nature of God’s kingdom among us now. God has already come down unto his beloved, even though the world is not yet at peace, and even though every person is not yet free. God is going to love us anyway – and so should we love as well. We are blessed by the love of God; we have experienced it abundantly, beautifully given in the tenderness and joy of friendship, and no less in the beauty and bounty of creation. And yet, we wait for more.

What we wait for in this “not yet” piece of the kingdom is a mystery, but I think Wendell Berry comes as close as anyone can when he imagines all the world at peace and everyone free. For now, it’s like we live in one of those side canyons, on the border between paradise and desert. I’m not sure there is anything we can do to bring the “not yet” reality about except to witness to the blessing, the abundant blessing, that is meant not for just one brother or the other, but for the whole family. That’s the point of the abundance we see in the life of Jesus. In his life, in the stories about him, we are given a new perspective that says there’s enough to go around; there’s plenty for all of us, so quit worrying and just accept it. It’s up to us to accept God’s love and let our lives bear evidence to it, just as a rock face bears evidence of geological time.

You know, if you pick up any given rock, most likely you’ll see a composite of different materials and forces which have gone into it’s formation. The strata will tell a story of history and time, of pressure, heat and cooling. If we see that as a metaphor for any given life, for yours or mine, we have to acknowledge that we don’t get to choose all of the layers that have gone into our individual histories. There are forces at work that are beyond our control – some that we might avoid if given the choice. We might not get to choose the strata that tell the story of our lives, but we do get to choose love when it’s offered to us – and we can choose to make love abundant by giving it back to the world without restraint. We can’t choose the story of the world recorded in the strata of history all around us, but we can choose the story that rests at the bottom of our hearts.

And that leads to the final lesson I learned in the Grand Canyon: all of that rock, as hard as it is and as old as it is, is dynamic. It’s always changing – the wind and water, the heating and cooling are always acting up on it, shifting things around, changing things subtly and sometimes not so subtly. A new story is always in the making.

The force of your love, your abundant love, can change the course of history. It can change everything. The force and the power of your love can turn scarcity into abundance. It can turn “not yet” into “already.”