

Pastor T.C. Arnold  
Septuagesima  
Exodus 17:1-7  
January 31, 2021

A former missionary to Botswana once taught me that the indigenous people had three very important proverbs by which they lived. The first one was, “a person is a person through another person.” In other words, a person is not simply an autonomous agent. They are who they are because they belong to the community – the tribe. Who they are is a person a part of a community and not a person by themselves.

The second proverb is a little strange. It goes like this: “The fat of a child will be sent.” This means that the elders of the community eat first. The children are sent by the elders to do what they are given to do. They do that first then they eat. This proverb essentially means that life is more delicious when we don’t just do what we want – sit around the fire and eat until we burst – but rather a life of service is a true life of significance. Life is not a life of what we want but rather has purpose for others.

The third important proverb, the one that resonates quite well with both the Old Testament and Gospel texts appointed for this day, is this: “The chief eats last.” If you want to see who the most important person in the community is, watch and see which one has food on his plate after everyone else has something to eat.

That last proverb may make us think of the Gospel text for today, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. At the end of it Jesus says, “*So the last will be first and the first will be last.*” The first in the community is the king. But Jesus turns it around in the parable making those who came last equal to the one who came to work in the vineyard first. This is not unlike the way that Jesus lived His whole life. Jesus was the servant king. When He heals the sick and raises the dead, Jesus did this not for Himself but for those who suffered. When Jesus taught, He poured Himself out with words of instruction for life and sweet words of redemption. When, of course, Jesus took all of our sins to the cross, with a crown of thorns and a plaque hanging above Him that Pilate wrote, “The King of the Jews,” He was the greatest servant of all. Jesus eats last for you.

In the Old Testament text, the tribe grumbled. God promised that He would provide for the people but the people lost faith in that promise. We get it, they were thirsty. The chief under the “Head Chief” says, “*Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?*” The chief hasn’t had anything to drink. I’m sure he is thirsty too. The chief trusts in the promises of the “Head Chief” and knows that God will provide – the last will be first.

These three Sundays we call the “Gesima” Sundays focus us on the coming days of renewing. I suppose you could say these days are regarded as, “training” days for permanent improvement for the way we live our Christian life. God knows we need improvement – all of us do. These are not to be temporary improvements – so that we may go back to our selfish ways after Lent is over. No, rather, we are to take the example of the king and make the new life of the Christian a permanent thing. We are to do and live the life of a Christian each of our days, and these days show us how. They are more than a preparation for Lent, they are instruction for us that is to last the entirety of our lives.

Do not grumble against God as if to say He has forgotten His promises to you. I know sometimes you have to wait on that which you need the most right now. Be patient. Yes, even when you endure suffering. Call on Him. Tell Him what you need. It’s okay to pray with purpose by reminding God of His promises to deliver you. But do not believe for one minute that He has forgotten you. He has not and never will.

Do not complain because your underserving neighbor seems to enjoy God's favor. Just remember, though you may love God more, have served Him longer, none of us deserve the wages paid out by the master. All of us deserve God's wrath instead of His mercy. Beloved, repent and turn to the Lord. You are not better. You are not God's favorite. We all are. Even the one you least expect.

Like the first of those essential proverbs that the people in Botswana live by, we live with a certain identity. We identify, by virtue of our baptisms into Christ, as Christians. This is our tribe. Yes, your family is your tribe too... and you cannot be identified individually without also identifying with the family you are from. But more than *who* we are as a man or a woman... it is better to know *whose* we are... a people belonging to our Lord. We are a people whose identity is wrapped up in Jesus.

And like that second proverb, we are people who God puts into service. That is a marker of our Christian identity. Your neighbor needs you... and God needs you for the sake of your neighbor. God shows His love to your neighbor through your service. Life is more delicious when we don't just do what we want.

And the third proverb... here is the picture of our King before His people. In the desert, the people of God eat first. Well, they drink first. Even after their faithless display of mistrust. The King eats last. You want to know who the King is, see who it is that eats last.

These days we have before us in the church year are not just moving us toward Lent – a solemn and penitential time. They are moving us toward our Lord's passion and resurrection. If you call to mind that very passionate story... the story of the passion... here is our King Jesus sitting before His disciples during the time of the Passover and taking wine, taking bread and feeding the body and the souls of His disciples with His very body and blood. He serves them first. The King eats last.

If you call to mind the way that Jesus gave Himself in teaching the disciples in the garden after the Passover meal. The way that Jesus gave Himself to the Heavenly Father's will in prayer at the garden of Gethsemane... He gave Himself into the hands of the temple guard after betrayal by Judas... He was completely humiliated standing there being ridiculed and beaten by the members of a Sanhedrin that was supposed to show Him complete honor.

The King ate last when he stood before Pilate as the people called out time and time again, "Crucify Him." The King ate last when that purple robe and crown of thorns adorned the sacred head now wounded. The King of all kings... the King of life... ate the meal that was put before Him – that is, His death – as He is nailed to the precious cross that has become the symbol of life for those who eat first.

Our King and Lord, who eats last, puts us first. Even quarreling, thirsty desert wanderers like us. Yes, we wander in the desert of this world, happy and content to live in our sins. But our Lord is not happy with it. So, He does more than quench our thirst. He brings water to us and attached His promise. He baptizes us into His Holy family and calls us His very own daughters and sons. (He calls Hollie His very own daughter today). Our King eats last so we can feast with Him in heaven to come.

Beloved in the Lord, see how your King loves you. See how we are people through another, like the first proverb says. See how we are given our work to do by God who serves His loved ones through those He loves, like the second proverb. And see how our King dies... He does everything so that you might be first. What a gracious King – Jesus our Lord – is for us. Amen.

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