Leadership By Grace

Isaiah 55:1-13

July 18, 2021

Once upon a time, there were two brothers who inherited their father's land. The brothers divided the land in half and each one farmed his own section. Over time, the older brother married and had six children, while the younger brother never married. One night, the younger brother lay awake. "It's not fair that each of us has half the land to farm," he thought. "My brother has six children to feed and I have none. He should have more grain than I do." So that night the younger brother went to his silo, gathered a large bundle of wheat, and climbed the hill that separated the two farms and over to his brother's farm. Leaving the wheat in his brother's silo, the younger brother returned home, feeling pleased with himself. Earlier that very same night, the older brother was also lying awake. "It's not fair that each of us has half the land to farm," he thought. "In my old age my wife and I will have our grown children to take care of us, not to mention grandchildren, while my brother will probably have none. He should at least sell more grain from the fields now so he can provide for himself with dignity in his old age." So that night, too, he secretly gathered a large bundle of wheat, climbed the hill, left it in his brother's silo, and returned home, feeling pleased with himself. The next morning, the younger brother was surprised to see the amount of grain in his barn unchanged. "I must not have taken as much wheat as I thought," he said, bemused. "Tonight I'll be sure to take more." That very same moment, his older brother was also standing in his barn, musing much the same thoughts.  
 After night fell, each brother gathered a greater amount of wheat from his barn and in the dark, secretly delivered it to his brother's barn. The next morning, the brothers were again puzzled and perplexed. "How can I be mistaken?" each one scratched his head. "There's the same amount of grain here as there was before I cleared the pile for my brother. This is impossible! Tonight I'll make no mistake - I'll take the pile down to the very floor. That way I'll be sure the grain gets delivered to my brother." The third night, more determined than ever, each brother gathered a large pile of wheat from his barn, loaded it onto a cart, and slowly pulled his haul through the fields and up the hill to his brother's barn. At the top of the hill, under the shadow of a moon, each brother noticed a figure in the distance. Who could it be? When the two brothers recognized the form of the other brother and the load he was pulling behind, they realized what had happened. Without a word, they dropped the ropes to their carts and embraced.

This morning as we join together in the ordination and installation of elders, our focus is on the grace of God. Today we give thanks for grace that is abundant and surprising as is shown in this folktale likely from the Talmud and in our text from the prophet Isaiah. The folktale speaks of generosity and grace, and there are a few things in this text that are relevant for today. First, Isaiah reminds us that the God who calls us is a God of grace. “Come and buy without money and without price” the prophet says. It’s hard to imagine a market filled with food that has no price tags and where people are coming in and getting what they need. What good business person would ever do that? It’s unsustainable. The first few lines of Isaiah 55 are actually a command for those who are evidently thirsty and hungry to come and buy without money and without price. Wine, milk, and likely bread and grain are available...a clear image of God’s invitation and gracious provision. When we are called to lead, we may wonder now and then if we have what we need. We bring our own particular experiences and gifts and skills, and the surprising grace of God is the source of them all. This grace, too, is at work especially when we are unsure of ourselves. In the words of Brent Strawn, Professor of Old Testament at Duke Divinity school, what we see in this text “is nothing less than a proclamation of salvation and good news.” God’s grace is abundant and free.

The story then shifts and names the poor use of resources that do not end in satisfactory results. “Why are you spending on things that do not satisfy?” the prophet asks. Do you not know that what is satisfying is to listen carefully and feast on the good things of God which lead to life. When we are called to lead, our energy is best used in listening to one another and listening for God speaking among us. Ruling elders are those who not only bring their own gifts, but they also are called to listen to one another, listen to the congregation, and listen for God in it all as they discern the path ahead. None of us are experts by the way. But we can practice listening… together.

The prophet also says that this life that comes from listening is connected to the idea of everlasting covenant with God. Life comes in the covenant that God makes and never breaks. What is surprising here is that the prophet says the covenant is now expanding. What was once a covenant with only the house of David, now is open to everyone who would come. Old Testament scholar Julianna Classsens, notes that “the house” that God had promised to build for David in 2 Sam 7:11, which denoted a sense of permanence and stability, now is opened to all people who would heed the invitation and join the festival that leads to life.” This is relevant for the church today as we are shifting out of a Christendom culture where most people we knew went to church or had some connection… to a postmodern world where the fastest growing group are those who consider themselves “nones” - those with no religious affiliation - according to the Pew Research Center they are now one fifth of the U.S. public and a third of adults under 30. Claasens says “The living word of God, which is as nourishing to the soul as milk is to the body; which brings as much joy to the mind as wine does to the human heart, can never become stagnant and mechanically transmitted from generation to generation.” Being a leader today means being willing to look beyond what has been and being open to new places where God might lead. Gigi Ross, mangager of the Living School at the Center for Action and Contemplation has compared this to looking through a pinhole camera. She said, “as human beings, we only have a limited amount of sight. I’m nearsighted and myopic, so I look through a pinhole camera without my glasses. I can actually see much clearer than I can if I don’t have a pinhole camera and I’m not wearing my glasses, but that clarity of sight comes at a huge cost. By having everything down to that pinhole, there’s a whole lot that I can’t see. And if I’m not aware of the fact that I’m only seeing through a pinhole, I can act as if my whole world is what I can see in that pinhole.” Being a leader today calls for a willingness to step away from our limited sight, and watch, listen, pause and work together to discern God’s guidance.

Friends, today we give thanks for Gods abundant and surprising grace that has called, equipped and is equipping both Tripp and Jean. We give thanks for God’s abundant and surprising grace that calls and is equipping us all to be faithful to God as we love and serve others. Thanks be to God, that grace is sufficient for us all.