

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 20, Year A (both tracks)

First Reading

Exodus 16:2–15 (track one)

And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.” So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, “At evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against the LORD. For what are we, that you grumble against us?” And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD.”

Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, ‘Come near before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.’” And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. And the LORD said to Moses, “I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. (ESV)

Jonah 3:10-4:11 (track two)

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. (ESV)

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?”

Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (ESV)

Second Reading

Philippians 1:21–30

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your

salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 20:1–16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Exodus text (track one)

This story of God’s first gift of manna in the wilderness has so many potential routes of exploration that I think that if I tried to give them all their due, I’d be wandering in the Wilderness myself for the next forty years. And yet, I find myself unable to identify just one (or even just two) and leave all the others aside. So what I’m going to do is try to give a brief outline of several possible jumping-off points, and then ask you to choose the rabbit trail you’d like to follow.

At the textual and pretextual level - What happened to the quail?

First, as we look at the basic text of our story, we'll notice some narrative unevenness. First God hears the grumbling of the people of Israel and tells Moses what He's going to do, then Moses and Aaron tell the people God has heard their grumbling, but then Moses tells Aaron to summon the people (a formal phrase that means being called before God, likely at the Tent of Meeting) and when they get there, God tells Moses what to say to them. It reads more smoothly if you skip verses four and five.

This has led some scholars to suggest that those verses are from another source, or a later interpolation, but however they got there, they serve an important function. They introduce into this story the notion that God's gift of the manna is not only a gracious gift, but a test, to see if they'll be obedient to the Sabbath.

Also at the textual level is the question of the quail. They appear here as a part of God's provision for the people. There isn't any indication that this was to be a one time event, and yet they don't reappear until Numbers 11, where their arrival is a precursor to a plague. The quail are a clear product of God's displeasure.

Brevard Childs suggests that this resulted from the combination of two different oral traditions, one about manna (gift) and one about quail (curse) and that the curse only survives in the later occurrence (Numbers). There are two themes that seem woven throughout the Wilderness account. In one, God is a gracious provider and in the other, God is angered by the people's grumbling against Him and His servants Moses and Aaron. (And still God provides.) While we don't see the overt wrath displayed in our reading this week, we can see echoes of those narrative strands.

There has been plenty written concerning just what the manna actually was, and how the quail came to be in the desert. Both have reasonable connections to real-life events that may have been incorporated into the narrative.

Manna is thought to be a product of the sap of the tamarisk tree. Certain insects puncture the fruit of this tree and then excrete a white, flaky (or ball shaped) substance that hardens in the cool of the night, but melts away in the heat of the day. This substance also attracts ants, which may be what the "worms" refer to. People consume this substance to this day, though the "harvest" of it is small.

Likewise, it has been shown that sometimes flocks of migratory birds coming up from Africa fall in exhaustion on the Arabian peninsula, which may also be the source of the stories about quail.

How does the possibility that we can explain these events naturally affect how you read them?

The story of the manna has many echoes in the New Testament. They begin with the story of Jesus in the Wilderness. After 40 days (The Israelites would eventually be in the desert for 40 years) He is famished, and the first temptation offered to Him is “bread,” like the “bread” made from the manna. He can, in His authority, cause the same miracle that fed God’s people, but He refuses.

Later during the life and ministry of Jesus, a great many people have followed Him into the wilderness to hear Him. They are hungry and lost, and again there is a miraculous provision of bread (and fish). Given the echoes of the wilderness experience that was a part of every Israelite’s formation, is it any wonder they came to try to make Jesus a king?

I am personally convinced that this story of the giving of the manna also has echoes in the Lord’s Prayer. The request (some request, it’s in the “imperative” mood!) for “daily” bread is meant to refer to the kind of daily reliance on God that the manna occasioned.

Last of the occurrences from the life of Jesus is His speech in John 6, where He says that He is in fact the bread which will sustain life in a way that manna could not. He is the true bread sent from the Father. He contrasts this Bread with the bread that was given in the wilderness, and if we read that passage without hearing Exodus reverberating in our heads, we lose much of the meaning of it.

Paul also makes reference to manna (“spiritual food”) in 1 Corinthians 10, where it is a sign to them that having been blessed by God (as the Corinthians see themselves) is no guarantee that they may yet be overthrown if they “seek evil.” (Or test God, as in Numbers 11.) He mentions the manna (indirectly) again in 2 Corinthians 8:15 when he quotes Exodus 16:18. The equality of distribution in the desert (no one had lack) is an example for the Corinthians of the way that they should respond to the needs of the “saints in Jerusalem.”

Can you see now why I couldn’t go into them all in depth? Have fun!

Jonah text (track two)

Our reading from Jonah this week follows shortly after the reading from the same book that we had on the Third Sunday of Epiphany in year B. In that text, the city of Nineveh listens to Jonah’s word and believes in God, repenting in sackcloth. God sees what they have done and relents from imposing the punishment that was planned. This week we

get to see Jonah's temper tantrum. He is angry that God was merciful to them, even though he knew that God was "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster," and so he sits and pouts under a plant, which dies, and so he pouts some more about the plant.

And that is really part of the point of the whole book, which points to God's mercy not just for God's own people but for all the nations, and I think, to some degree, points to the resentment that some of God's people might feel when mercy is shown to those who "shouldn't get it." You may recall back when I first wrote on Jonah that I had only recently discovered that the book is one of those included in "The Book of the Twelve," a collection of minor prophets that had existed independently before being included in the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures. These twelve smaller books had not only been collected, but also edited by the collector to accentuate the idea that the Northern and Southern kingdoms would one day be united and that all the nations would one day be drawn to God through the reunited Israel. So God's mercy toward Nineveh plays a key role in making the breadth of God's mercy toward all the nations clear.

This week, I learned something new about Jonah and its place in The Book of the Twelve. It turns out that there is a close relationship between Jonah, one of the twelve books, and Joel, another of the books. Both include almost verbatim a passage from today's reading.

Jonah 4:2

For I knew
that you are a God
 gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and great in
 loving kindness
and repents of evil.

Joel 2:13 ab-b

For he is gracious
 and compassionate
slow to anger and great in
 loving kindness
and repents of evil.

The two passages are too similar not to have some relationship, though scholars cannot agree on which one is dependent on the other. In the end, I don't think it matters. What

matters is that both of these texts highlight the mercy of God. In Joel toward God's disobedient people. In Jonah toward the nations. In the article from which I learned this (link below) the author, Thomas B. Dozeman goes on to suggest that these formulations are a part of the reinterpretation of the declaration of God's nature first found in Exodus 34:6, "YHWH, YHWH, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and great in loving kindness." You can see his point.

My question is this: How do we connect to declarations of God's mercy towards us that we then find covering all of humankind, and not just those of us who believe?

Second Reading

Before I get into the specifics of this week's reading, I think I should give you an introduction to the letter as a whole, to give our reading some context.

I have always simply enjoyed reading Philippians so much in the past that I paid very little attention to what the scholarly commentators had to say about the letter. When I finally started to actually *study* Philippians so that I could write something worth reading I got a real kick in the head.

For instance, did you know that prior to the latter part of the 20th century many historical-critical students of Philippians had decided that this letter, like 2nd Corinthians, was a compilation of other letters? At least two or three of them? How did I miss that in seminary? Well, I'll tell you how I missed it. We didn't pay any attention at all to this letter that I can remember when we studied Paul. And when I taught Paul at our diocesan school? I was guilty of the same. So much attention is given to Romans, Corinthians (both), and Galatians that you can (and we did) forget to give Philippians the attention it needs.

Fortunately for me, by the time I got to seminary, other commentators were arguing forcibly and convincingly for the unity of the letter, from a variety of different approaches. So even if I had studied the letter in those early years of my formation, I think I'd have been spared the worst of the effects of the "compilation" approach. Still, I think that much of what goes on in a seminary classroom is 20-30 years behind the most recent scholarship, so who knows.

As we're going to be reading Philippians for the next four weeks on Sunday mornings, it will be good to affirm here that, after perusing more recent scholarship on the Epistle to Philippi, I am convinced that it is indeed a unified whole. (But I have to admit here that most of what I have access to is also 20-30 years old!)

Now that I've re-established (at least for myself) that Philippians is one letter, I am confronted with the same question that I ask of every letter from Paul, "What was his purpose in writing it?" It is difficult to ask that question of the small portions of Paul that we get sometimes on Sunday morning, but if we're to study the texts faithfully, I don't see that we can avoid it, so I keep trying to set our lectionary bits back into that larger framework.

While I was reading in preparation for this week I came across an article that surveyed "recent" (it was written in the 90's) scholarship on Philippians. This isn't one I'd recommend, really, but I'll link it at the end for those who are terminally curious. It did help me to refocus on the question of Paul's intent, the issue he sought to address in Philippi by his letter, but it didn't give me a clear answer to my question. Of course it didn't. It gave me four different answers from four different authors (along with some tangential opinions). As we read through portions of the Letter to the Philippians together over the next four weeks I'm going to focus on two of them which, while disagreeing with each other on the focus of the letter, nonetheless seem capable of being combined in a way that makes both stronger.

In one article the author describes a chiastic (though he calls it concentric) form in the letter that focuses on the Christ hymn in chapter two. As those of you who have read my paper on the chiastic structure of Mark will know, that approach has some appeal to me. The structure that the author describes is convincing, and leads him to focus on the center of the chiasm for the letter's purpose, that being "obedience." He reads that obedience as the solution to the issue that Paul finally deals with in chapter four, the division between Euodia and Syntyche. As we saw in Romans, Paul devotes a great deal of time in his letters building up to the exhortations which deal with his real purpose in writing. This division then, while briefly mentioned, makes some sense as the proximate cause of the letter. I'll come back to that in a minute.

In the other article the author argues for a political/military reading of Paul's rhetoric that builds on classical ideas of citizenship and duty. These ideals then are focused on threats from within (division) and without (intimidation by external groups). The author of the survey that covered this second article seemed to think that there was ample support in classical philosophy for the formal and linguistic claims the author made. What I didn't gather from the review of the article (and alas, I don't have access to the full piece) was a clear idea of the issue in Philippi that prompted the letter. This is why I'm moved to read the two approaches as complementary.

In the first of the two approaches I find helpful, the author centers his chiasm on the famous Christ hymn of Philippians, "Have the same in yourselves that was in Christ Jesus, who..." In choosing this center, Aspan, the author of the paper cited by the

reviewer, points toward Christ's "obedience" as the focal point of the hymn and therefore also Paul's larger discourse. From this obedience to which Paul calls the Philippians naturally flows *koinonia*, community. Timothy and Epaphroditus are set up as prime examples of this obedience. Set over against this obedience is *eritheia*, "selfish ambition." Paul's argument then leads to his call for the resolution of difference in the spirit of *koinonia*, most especially that of the conflict between the two women (who must have been leaders of the congregation), Euodia and Syntyche. While this is, overall, a satisfying way to read the letter, it didn't deal very well with the issue of the "evildoers" of chapter three. (Though I have to admit here that I'm not reading the article itself, just the reviewer's summary.)

In the other of the articles that I found enlightening is the more historical, less formal approach, which grounds the language of Philippians in the writings of the classic philosophers, primarily with regard to the citizen's duty, politically and militarily. Putting duty above self dovetails nicely with the central focus on obedience in the first article, and both articles see "unity" as a fundamental goal of Paul's, though the second author (Geoffrion) places greater emphasis on "steadfastness" as the central value of the soldier, steadfastness against threats from without and within. This emphasis on threats from within seems to explain the warnings against the evildoers of chapter three, for me at least.

This second approach to reading the letter also gives a context for Paul's repeated emphasis on joy within the letter. We have all heard this letter called the "joy" letter or something like that, but Geoffrion has helped me to understand why Paul makes this repeated reference. In seeing "steadfastness" as the central value of the citizen (of heaven), joy (along with unity) is a significant contributor to that steadfastness. Co-suffering (Timothy and Epaphroditus) and co-rejoicing are definitions of citizenship within the philosopher's political view. Paul has adapted both of these to his cause.

In the end, it was the similarity of the place of "obedience" and "duty" in the two articles that allowed me to see them as complementary, and to allow each to fill out some of the pieces I saw as missing in the other.

Having said all that, I find that I've threatened some of the joy with which I read Philippians. Paul's emphasis on joy in a letter written from "imprisonment" and the incomparable hymn to Christ in chapter two have been my own anchors for reading and preaching on this letter, and subordinating them to Paul's purpose for the letter dimmed them initially. But reflecting further on these two themes that have been so important for me, I realized that while they do serve Paul's larger purpose in the letter, this in no way reduces the impact they have on my heart. In fact, setting those two very stirring elements increases their importance to me, as they become means to a greater end,

rather than ends in themselves. I am meant to be stirred, deeply stirred, but not just for the sake of the feeling, but rather so that I might become more steadfast, find greater unity, which is surely the greater good.

And now, at last, we'll look at the actual text set out for this Sunday, and see how that fits within Paul's larger framework and purpose. I apologize for all that went before, but I needed to lay all that out as foundation for all that will follow in the next four weeks.

Our reading for this week

The opening verses of our reading seem centered around the theme of "to live is Christ, to die is gain." Following on the earlier verses in which Paul talks about his imprisonment, it is clear that this isn't just a theoretical statement. He anticipates the significant possibility of his own death. But how does this contribute to the larger project of the letter? It seems to me that this fits into the citizen/soldier imagery that Paul uses throughout this epistle. It is his duty to remain if his commander (Christ) requires it, even though his heart might wish to be elsewhere. So this also is Paul using himself as an exemplar of the obedience that is at the center of both the chiasm and the Christ hymn.

Paul goes on to emphasize unity in the later verses of our reading (which again points toward the disunity of which Euodia and Syntyche are foremost examples) and then steadfastness in the face of opposition. These aren't divergent goals, the one (unity) supports the other (steadfastness).

Gospel Text

As I was preparing to write on the parable of the workers in the vineyard, I came across a paper written by Karen Lebacqz for the Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics. Some of you reading this may recognize her name, may have read one or more of her books. I know I have. I usually put links to the papers/articles I find at the end of the Divergence for which they're applicable, but this one struck me as so important that I'm putting it here, first. Then I'll try to summarize it (it's already pretty succinct) for those who aren't comfortable going to JSTOR.org to read it. (Registration is free, why wouldn't you?) First, here's the link:

[Justice, Economics, and the Uncomfortable Kingdom: Reflections on Matthew 20:1-16](#)

Now, here is my attempt to describe what I learned from Professor Lebacqz.

The article begins by trying to outline the difficulties an ethicist has in deriving ethical conclusions from Jesus' parables. They are, after all, parables, and subject to a huge variety of reading methods, some of which utterly deny the possibility of taking anything concrete away from them. But she goes on to suggest that even in light of this, some ethical guidance might be derived from them.

She then goes on (after explaining that the paper she wrote isn't the one she set out to write) to look at the parable of the workers in the vineyard. She begins by outlining five major interpretations of the parable, each of which has its strength, but to which she always adds a "yes, but...." I'll try to thumbnail these for you here, as I know that I've preached at least two of them at one time or another, and her "yes, but...."s stung a little. "Oh. I hadn't thought of that."

- 1) The "payment" in the parable is salvation, not something economic. This has the strength of pointing to an "indivisible" good that is distributed, such that there can only be one "denarius" per person. It's weakness is that it makes no sense to grumble about not getting more than others when there's no "more" to have. (I've preached this one.)
- 2) Justice is redefined. In this reading, God's justice and the distribution is about need, not what is earned. The strength of this is the truth that God's justice is truly different than ours. The weakness is that the parable makes no provision for need. Surely they didn't all need exactly the same thing?
- 3) The parable is fundamentally about God's generosity. The strength of this interpretation lies in the landowner's statement, "Do you begrudge my generosity?" The weakness here is that a parable about generosity might have shown God to be equally generous to all, overpaying everyone, not just the last to go into the vineyard.
- 4) The parable is about the unexpectedness of the Kingdom. God isn't just *per se* in the parable or He'd have given each his due. Neither is He generous *per se* or He'd have been equally generous to all. But God is unexpected. God does the unexpected, and it is this surprise that characterizes this interpretation. The weakness of this one is the "grumbling" of the first hired. They aren't surprised, they're angered. This interpretation misses this.
- 5) The focus of the parable is the "unrighteousness of the righteous." This reading focuses on the grumbling of the first to go to work. They are resentful of the landowner's payments to the latecomers. It recognizes the inability of the first hired to see the "good news" in the gifts to the last hired. This recognizes the "injustice" of what the landowner does, but doesn't make that central. Rather, it points toward the resentment of believers within the church who grumble that their longer standing before God is no more valued than that of the most recently converted. I find this especially meaningful in light of Matthew's Jewish Christian

congregation, and their sense that they have (first as Jews and now as Christians) been God's "workers" for far longer than their upstart Gentile co-believers. And yes, I've preached this one. The weakness of this is that it overlooks the very real injustice within the story. It isn't unreasonable to "grumble" when one realizes that some are rewarded better for their work than others. "Oh, I hadn't thought of that."

So that brings me to Lebacqz's own reading of the text. (Try typing her name ten times fast.) She begins by noting that the landowner pays the last-to-join workers first when it might have been reasonable to pay them last. The result of this is that it creates "expectation" in the last to be paid that, when their turn comes, they'll be paid more. It is their disappointment that drives the grumbling, the failure of expectation. It calls into question the manner in which we come to have the expectations we carry.

Then Lebacqz confronted me with the "How did I never think of that?" moment. She reads the parable in the context of Jesus' Jewish world, in which the Jubilee year is a fixture in notion of God's justice. That every seventh year should present a leveling of the playing field, a restoration to every person a place of significance and community worth, this idea makes the landowner's actions a reflection of an ineradicable element of God's justice. Everyone ends the day (I note that the end of the day marks the beginning of the next day) with the same denarius. Everyone starts the new day fresh.

This reading then calls up short those who would have sympathized with the grumblers. While their justice is sound in the short run, it overlooks the regular (daily/jubilee) reset that is part of God's justice, and it casts shadow on any notion that God rewards some more than others.

I can't help but read this paper, and this way of reading the parable, in light of the debt crisis in our world today. People, cities, nations are choked to death by debt and yet we dare declare that our nation is a "Christian" one. I'll stop now before I write a whole sermon!