

October 24, 2010

Exodus 35:20-35

“You will be our God; We will be your People”

We have been reading through the Bible for six weeks now, following J. Ellsworth Kalas’ guiding materials in *The Grand Sweep*.

There are two Scriptures that sum up for me this phase of our journey. One comes from Exodus, in a reading from Week Four. God has spoken to Moses from the burning bush, sending him to free his people from Pharaoh’s grip, to lead them out of slavery in Egypt to a promised land.

Moses, with his brother Aaron goes to Pharaoh to demand he free the Hebrews. The Hebrews then had to make bricks without straw in the same time as it took them to make bricks with straw. Moses watches the situation go from bad to worse and in desperation cries out to God, “Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people.” God replies with promises, assuring Moses that his people WILL be free. ***I will take you as my people and I will be your God,***” he says. (Ex. 6:7)

The second Scripture that comes to my mind at this point in our journey through the Bible comes from a text we will soon read: Lev. 26:12: ***And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.***

This is the story, you see. God reaches out to us and invites us to the reciprocal covenant described in these words. The readings from this past week are meant to help us as we try to respond to God’s grace with faithful living. God acts FIRST to reach out to **us**; then **we** are called to act as well—saying, ***You will be our God; we will be your people.***

J.Ellsworth Kalas helps us recognize this. As he points out, we all know about God’s grace. We see the amazing nature of this grace in the death of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross. But this grace appears long before then—at the beginning of our faith story. It’s right here, as God reaches out to us FIRST. ***I will be your God and you will be my people.*** God then offers us help through the commandments and the law, to guide us as WE, in turn, respond as God desires. He is waiting to hear us say, ***You will be our God and we will be your people.***

Instead, like the ancient Hebrews, we often say, “I don’t really WANT you as my God—I think I’ll worship this golden calf instead.” Our idols are different, but we have them: success, beauty, prestige, nation, language, lifestyle, even family. The story of how the people, led by Aaron, Moses’ brother, began to worship an idol WHILE MOSES WAS UP ON THE MOUNTAIN WITH GOD GETTING A SECOND SET OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS is amazing too. Moses broke the first tablets in a rage upon seeing the unfaithfulness of his people earlier. In response to God’s grace in offering the people a **second chance** to enter a covenant relationship, the people run the opposite direction.

In Kalas’ words, “It isn’t easy to live up to our divine commitments. We need all the help we can get. ...[T]his week’s reading[s] introduce us to two forms of this help. The first is a place of worship. A person can’t hope to live up to God’s expectations without the steadying and inspiring influence of regular and frequent worship. Israel’s traveling house of worship is so important that every detail is spelled out.” The second form of help is found in details of the law. The intricate descriptions of offerings and ordination may seem overwhelming, and certainly seem very foreign and strange. But the detail emphasizes the IMPORTANCE of how we approach the holy.

Grace is amazing. Our unfaithfulness is also amazing. So, let’s consider what is needed for us to handle our side of the covenant we have with God. Exodus 35:20-35 gives us guidelines for living and worshipping as God’s own people. We need the opportunity to worship God. Worship awakens the best that is in us. It nurtures our love for God and our love for others. Worship helps us build a close relationship to God, and that relationship is maintained by regular experiences of worship in places dedicated to the practice of worship.

What is needed then, for our faithful worship and faithful response to our God? Four things: Inspired people, Inspired Giving, Inspired Workers, Inspired Follow-Through.

When we join a United Methodist Church, we promise to support our church with our PRESENCE. When we gather to worship we need one another. We feel the energy of life and love reverberating throughout this sanctuary. We hear each other’s prayer requests and are drawn into one another’s lives. We are reminded that God is involved in those joys and concerns; that God is

acting as our Savior in the midst of them. We feel the love of God through his instruments, his people.

We are blessed by our choirs and musical groups here at Baker Memorial. I have been amazed and delighted this year to see SO MANY PEOPLE in various of the groups. Each person's presence in a choir contributes immensely to that ministry. Worship is much like the choir, enriched by each person present. Your presence is a present to us all. You see, each of us can only decide for ourselves to head over to the church building to get together to worship God. BUT, we can't be God's people all by ourselves. We all need all of us to be God's people.

To be the church God calls us to be Inspired Givers. When we join a United Methodist Church we promise to support the church with our GIFTS. Moses' people were inspired to give abundantly to the faith community. Their gifts helped make a wide variety of items needed for their worship. I am touched by the fact that the reading tells us over and over they gave because their HEARTS moved them, and made them willing to give what they had. If you read a bit further in Exodus, to chapter 36, verses 3-7, you will find the people brought too much in their offerings, so "the people were restrained from bringing; for what they had already brought was more than enough to do the all the work." What a wonderful problem to have!

What else is needed, for us to be faithful in our part of the covenant? The church needs Inspired Workers. When we join a United Methodist Church we promise to support the church with our service. This can be service within the church or service reaching out from the church. I am intrigued to observe the ebb and flow of persons willing to serve in the church. Most all of the time it seems women will offer food—for potlucks, bake sales, coffee hour, to take to those recovering from illness, for funeral luncheons. The men, when asked, are often willing to do repair and improvements around the building. But it varies when it comes to committees, for example. Some years we have lots of folks willing to serve in the groups that have concrete, clear tasks—like Finance, and Trustees. We struggle to find people willing to serve on Evangelism or Missions. Then it will flip the other direction, which is where we stand at the present time here at Baker Memorial.

We have people who will donate computers and furniture and clothing to help our refugee families. It's a challenge to recruit people willing to help implement our vision, developing goals and timelines to carry out the

ministry we believe God has given us. To be faithful people we ALL need to give our time and talents, In our Scripture some people gave things they owned: brooches, earrings, signet rings, pendants, all sorts of gold objects. Others, skillful women, for example, spun and wove to make things that were needed. In a following passage we hear about Bezalel and Oholiab, skilled craftsmen who offered their gift of labor.

We also need to be Inspired with Follow-through as we do our work for God. This is where we often fall down. I will confess that with the ongoing flow of constant activity in the church I myself bump into this problem. Things slip through the cracks; things get on a back burner; things slip to the bottom of our lists. But God wants us to honor him by sticking with it until the job is done. When we join a United Methodist Church we promise to support the church with our prayers. Sometimes the work of follow-through becomes tedious and difficult. We need to remember that God is with us and turn to him in prayer to receive the renewed energy and inspiration required to continue in our work.

God has told us his truth: “I will be your God and you will be my people.” He wants to hear us respond. Are you ready to tell him “You will be our God and we will be your people”? He will help us live out our side of this covenant. We need to worship, to BE the church, to take our turns to be Inspired people, Inspired Givers, Inspired Workers, Inspired with Follow-Through. Where is God calling you to focus today?

(Invite Fred Linebarger to share his Testimonial.)