

August 24, 2014 – 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Isaiah 22:15, 19-23; Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 6, 8; Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16:13-20

“The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.” -- Psalm 138:8

Paul today writes: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” Yes indeed, God knows us, our histories, our sorrows and our joys, our failures and our successes better than we know ourselves, and certainly better than we know others. And, if reflective and honest, we also know that we are not always faithful; not always faithful to the measure of divinely-planned stewardship we share over our own lives, over those placed closely in our lives, over our own society and its members and resources, and over the web of life and resources that make up our living planet. But God is always faithful; faithful because of an all-encompassing love of us and of the sacred character of what is expressed in creation as a whole. Neither we nor creation are ever outside the divine embrace.

Genesis teaches that we share stewardship with God, but quickly reminds us of our weaknesses in that regard when left to ourselves. Ultimately, there is only one truly faithful steward; just as there is one creator. And that ever-faithful creator-steward recovers and recreates what is sometimes damaged or lost by we who share in the everyday, practical aspects of stewardship for persons, for life, and over resources.

The character of the stewardship of life and resource that we daily participate in is, ultimately, not one of merit and payments, though these have their place. Our stewardship is of the same character as the character of God’s stewardship, i.e. based on inexplicable, inexhaustible love and care, and expressed in personal vulnerability and self-emptying.

The official, Shebna, Master of the Palace, may not have been capable of exercising this style of authority in his stewardship. But the Lord was ever-faithful, even in this particular situation of imbalance in stewardship. And through the Prophet Isaiah the Lord effected a rebalance.

Peter too, had to be rebalanced in the stewardship that he was given in today’s Gospel. Jesus gave Peter a share in his own stewardship of care for those being gathered through Jesus’ ministry. And yet, minutes later Jesus rebuked Peter for an exercise of his shared stewardship that was based on a character different from the one given by God to Jesus. And yet again, Jesus later had to once more rebalance the character of Peter’s stewardship after the resurrection when he asked Peter three times “Do you love me?” and then recommissioned him.

There are a number of emerging events in the world, some of them potentially disturbing to us, which may be fruitfully rethought in the light of today's readings. Among them is the growing economic power and influence of Asia. The emergence of Asia has many people unsettled, particularly the increasing influence of societies such as China and India, whose cultural and religious characters are so very different from ours; and in a few instances, diametrically opposed.

It should be kept in mind that between these two countries alone there are over two billion people who until very recently lived in societies characterized by great poverty and very little social change. Along with the increase in wealth I have experienced in these societies, I have also seen many social developments and liberalizations that were undreamt of even a decade ago. Could it be that creator-steward is stirring generative processes among those peoples, not necessarily deservedly or in a direct-payment response, but out of compassion for those straining under the heaviness of decades, even centuries, of poverty and stagnation? Yet, we may find ourselves in the same state of offended surprise that the people of Jesus' time experienced when he reminded a self-confident and proud nation that God sometimes acted decisively outside their society; in cleansing an unbelieving leper, Namaan, while some in Israel remained unclean; and in coming to the assistance of a hungry, unbelieving widow of Zarephtha, while some in Israel continued to be hungry.

It may not be enough for the Faithful Creator-Steward to have said on the lips of some: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" God instead seems to wish that all peoples may also be able to echo Paul's subsequent words and say: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

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