

Pentecost 17, Proper 22
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

October 5, 2014
Rev. Paul Moore

Stewards

Yesterday the Ministerial Alliance offered the blessing of pets to the community. We had the usual, dogs, cats, and a few exotics like a hawk. And we had the usual requests: "Do a real good job on this one, Father, he really needs it."

What does it mean to bless the animals that live with us? It depends on what we mean by blessing. Sometimes we really mean magic. *"My dog is a pain the kiester. I don't have the hutzpah to keep him in line. Please invoke a higher power so that I get what I want, which is a nice dog without going to the work!"* Sometimes we mean nice things have happened to us. We say, "I have been blessed in life." We mean, *"I really worked hard and made a lot of money. I had opportunities that I made good use of. I employed a lot of people and paid them fairly. Life has treated me well."* In terms of the little rite we did yesterday, blessing is an invocation of the grace of God to establish and strengthen right relationships. In this case, our relationships with the non-humans that live with us. Right relationships have to do with three aspects of the way you tell your story. We see them reflected in our readings today.

First, it means an appreciation of the real roles different parties play. In the first lesson today God tells a little story. "I planted a vineyard," says God. "I watered it, seeded it, fertilized it, protected it, and planted good grapes in it. But it produced only bad grapes. It has not reciprocated for the care I gave it." It is an allegory about Israel. God planted her, God protected and nourished her, God did everything possible for her, and yet she has not returned him glory and worship and obedience, the good grapes God expected.

The problem is in the way the story is told. Israel is saying, "We're a self-made nation. We whupped the Egyptians, we trashed the Canaanites, We took their land because the best goes to the best." And the story they told of themselves omitted the role that God plays. Rightly told, the story states that God conquered the Egyptians and God gave them the land of Canaan. They were not rightly appreciating the role that each party played, and their relationship was all screwed up.

We, too, are in a relationship with our Creator, whether we know it, like it or want it. We are created in, by and for unconditional, eternal and limitless Love. It's the relationship between the water in the stream and the mountain that gives it birth. The stream cannot tell the story of its flow rightly without telling the story of the mountain, and so, you cannot tell your story without telling the story of your Source.

When we, the creatures, rightly tell the story of our Source we are rightly related and we are blessed.

Second, it takes honest stock of the environment in which it lives. In the psalm the image of a vineyard appears again. The setting is different. This time Israel is in exile in Babylonia. They are complaining to God. “God, you planted us, yes, and you watered us and took care of us, but then you turned your back and the wild animals invaded (Babylonians) They have trashed your vineyard. Come and restore the work of your hands.”

Now, the accusation is true, but it is incomplete. They had gotten the story out of whack. They assumed that God would always protect Israel, God would never let Jerusalem fall, God would never drive us from the land, and God would never let the dynasty of David fail. To help them tell their story rightly God puts them in a strange environment. Here they are not in their own land. Here there is no temple, no Jewish king, and no priesthood. There is only a strange people, a strange tongue, a strange land and strange gods.

The change in scenery did the job. After the exile Israel never struggled with the ancient Canaanite gods again. The synagogue, which emerged in the exile, allows Jews to worship God anywhere now. During and after the exile they realized just how important the story was, and began recording it. (The Pentateuch—the first 5 books of the Bible, according to the best scholars—is a product of the exile.)

We, too, are in an environment. It is not simply the arbitrary backdrop for the story of your soul. The environment in which your relationship with God exists is one of the players in the story. It matters.

You may be in Israel before the conquest. Distractions carry you away easily. You can usually find somewhere else to be on Sunday mornings. You have never really thought seriously about a tithe. Your motivation for doing good is mainly to feel good about yourself. This is your inner environment., And it tells you about where you are. It tells you where you stand with God. You may need something to shake you up, get you serious about your faith, focus you.

You may be in exile. You wonder where God is. You see the destruction of all you thought God valued, and you're tempted to be angry. One half of you wants to rant and rail, the other half is tempted to self-loathing. But one thing is for sure, God has your attention. This is your inner environment. It tells you where you are, and it tells you where you stand with God. Let me assure you, things will get better..

You may be back in the Promised Land. You have vivid memories of the time of suffering, and they have taught you wisdom. You are not as frenetic as when you were in exile, neither as dismissive as before. The Promised Land isn't quite where you remembered it. It seems to crop most everywhere. You find God wherever you turn. This is your inner environment. It tells you where you are, and it tells you where you stand with God. You have many gifts to give the people of God.

Finally, it has to do with the goal or purpose of the relationship. Jesus tells another parable in the Gospel lesson today. A landowner prepared a vineyard (familiar theme by now) and went on a journey. As was custom in the day, he rented it out to sharecroppers. But the sharecroppers are not good tenants. They tell themselves that if they keep away the landowner they can keep the vineyard. They have no legal recourse for doing this, it is pure and simple piracy. Of course, the landowner comes back in person and sets the story straight.

The tenants have lost sight of the purpose of the relationship. They were given one kind of relationship with the land to use it to honor a different kind of relationship with another human being. The arrangement was meant to provide enough for everyone to live with honor. But they valued the land for its own sake, and then trashed the other relationships in order to have it. Of course, they do not end up with it in the long run. It's like they've got a script to the play, but the final scene doesn't turn out as they hoped because they forgot the ending.

What is the final scene for the play of your life? Where is your life going? What do you expect of it? What is it that you will leave behind? What is your purpose, the final scene of your story? Like with the tenants, the final scene has been written already. All the parts together tell the story of Creation and Redemption. Are you on board or not?

There is a word that describes right relationship with God in the context of our lives. The word is "stewardship." A steward is one who manages the affairs of someone else. They are always answerable to the Owner, but within that context they have all the leeway to employ all the gifts of who they are to reach for the goals set by the Owner. If we are stewards of our lives, then our lives are a divine trust from our Owner. There is Someone to whom we will give account, Someone who is the Great Player, the Environment and the End and Purpose of our lives. We are given the freedom to employ all our giftedness to accomplish the ends of that Someone. Tell your story rightly. Play your part faithfully, and like the Apostle Paul in the Epistle lesson today, keep your eye on the heavenly prize.