

The Lessons Appointed for

Use on the

Sunday Closest to June 15

Proper 6

Year A

RCL

Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

Matthew 9:35-10:23



The Collect

The Collect

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the ser-

vant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied,

saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

Dilexi, quoniam

- 1 I love the LORD, because he has heard the voice of my supplication, *
because he has inclined his ear to me whenever I called upon him.
- 10 How shall I repay the LORD *
for all the good things he has done for me?
- 11 I will lift up the cup of salvation *
and call upon the Name of the LORD.
- 12 I will fulfill my vows to the LORD *
in the presence of all his people.
- 13 Precious in the sight of the LORD *
is the death of his servants.
- 14 O LORD, I am your servant; *
I am your servant and the child of your handmaid;
you have freed me from my bonds.
- 15 I will offer you the sacrifice of thanksgiving *
and call upon the Name of the LORD.
- 16 I will fulfill my vows to the LORD *
in the presence of all his people,

17 In the courts of the LORD's house, *
in the midst of you, O Jerusalem.
Hallelujah!

Matthew 9:35-10:23

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and

Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come

upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and

children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”

SERMON

Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Our Gospel passage is sometimes called Jesus’s ordination sermon. It is time to expand His labor force. Jesus has carefully groomed and trained his small corps and He is now sending them out into the world to disperse His message.

Notice that he sends ALL his disciples, including Judas, into the harvest. Judas has not yet betrayed Jesus, but he will. We tend to define people by the worst thing they ever do. If someone does a bad thing, we brand him with that offense for all time. Jesus finds ways to use even Judas. People can’t quite manage that. God manages it. God is God. God manages things that defeat us. We speak of miracles. What we mean, however, are

those things God manages which would defeat us.

For instance, we live in a world which bears the unmistakable touch of Jesus. Have you ever meditated on how remarkable that is? Whether one is a confessing Christian or an atheist, it is impossible today to be ignorant of the life of Jesus, yet Jesus was not a particularly visible person in his day. He had no great army to force awareness upon the public. He held no office such that there would be historical accounts of his life. He was executed as a criminal. There is absolutely NOTHING in the life of Jesus which should have made his story persist over so long a period of time and over such space.

But here it is.

Last Sunday, I confessed to you how spectacularly unsuited I am to teach you anything of consequence.

Yet, with God's grace, here I am.

Sarah was way too old to have a child, yet she did. God seems to glory in unlikely outcomes.

Lest you miss the point, look carefully at how the persistence of this story was managed. If you are going to touch all of history from that time forward, and bring this unlikely story to the awareness of our, future, time, you would expect Jesus's focus to be on the big structures of the time, yet Jesus's target audience was the very people who should leave no trace at all in history.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus grants power to his disciples to cast out evil spirits and cure diseases, but then instructs them to take nothing with them, relying on the kindness of strangers, if you will. They are not going out as powerful men to bend the course of history, but as servants to those who

suffer. It's as if Jesus is doing everything he possibly can to make sure nobody in the future will ever hear about Him so that when it happens, it will be all the more inexplicable. If Jesus was a sprinter, it's as if he undertook the 100 meter dash, announcing that he would do it on one foot, then won the race.

Now things get really hairy.

See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves

This is the powerful Jesus, the Imperial Jesus, if you will, speaking. Jesus in Matthew 9 is something disconcerting – the giver of power, the general directing his army. That is what I want to get across to you – the “otherness” of God. The Late Rev. Larry Paul Jones, who taught me apocalyptic, read us the passage from Revelation which describes Jesus in frightening terms, with a sharp double-edged sword in his mouth. Then, he

said, “Jesus ain’t your fishin’ buddy.” That’s what I’m trying to express: God is nothing like anything else in your life. God is God. There is none like Him. A meeting with God in prayer isn’t a chummy chat between equals or even nearly equals. It is a meeting between a creature and his Creator, the source of all there is. That is so uncomfortable that we often cook up an image of God we can feel chummy with, one created in our own image – the old man with a white beard, sitting on a throne, perhaps. That won’t do, church. That’s a form of idolatry. God is God. There is none like him. We cannot reconstruct him in ways we find more comfortable. We must relate to him as he is, sharp double-edged sword and all. Nevertheless, we are invited into relationship with God! How are we to respond to such an unthinkable invitation?

When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant.”

Abraham, aged 99 years, ran to them. He bowed down to the ground. He addressed them strangely in the singular as “My Lord”. He acknowledged that he might not be worthy for them to even notice. He begged to be permitted to serve them. That’s a lot of running and hastening for a 99 year old man.

American Protestants bring a lot of baggage to this business of prayer. We’ve been big shots on the world stage so long, we find it enormously difficult to see ourselves in a subservient position. But Abraham, rich and powerful as he was, did just that. His every word, his

every action acknowledged his inferiority to these visitors, or visitor. That's not so easy for an American Protestant to pull off. We celebrate the individual, and as a consequence we think of prayer in terms of talking things over with our good buddy and getting something we want.

When our daughter Kat was a little girl, she made friends with another little girl whose family did not very often go out to eat. One weekend, we took both girls to Jenny Wiley for a show and dinner. The little girl had never visited a buffet before, and was mightily impressed. We loaded up our plates and headed back to our table where she announced that we had to pray first. We said grace and, after a bit, went back for seconds. To our surprise, she insisted on praying a second time. When we said that was not really necessary, she insisted, explaining that praying over your food makes the

food taste better.

After you get over the initial reaction to just how cute that is coming from a pre-schooler, there's an important lesson here. The little girl did not understand prayer in the same way Abraham did. She understood prayer as something one did to make the food taste better. That's the baggage American Protestants bring to prayer. If we are not very careful, we'll come to see prayer as something one does to make life better, to insure something we want, instead of as a time of communing with God to beg for an opportunity to serve Him. Abraham knew he was in the presence of the divine, and he buried his face in the dust. His every action was to find ways to please the Lord, to serve him. There was no thought of how it might benefit him. His only desire was to serve the Lord.

When next you pray, church, be aware of how you

approach God. Are you hastening to bring the best, and begging to be permitted to serve Him, or are you praying to make the food taste better? What do you think about prayer, church?

AMEN

BENEDICTION

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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