

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

“EVERYONE?”

Romans 10:8b-13

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

We live in a world of “haves” and “have-nots.” Most of the time we think of this in terms of the fortunate or blessed versus the oppressed or downtrodden. There are those who are born into wealth, and those who are born into poverty. Some people live in the suburbs and others in the inner city. And then there are the people who live well because of others who have to labor long and hard for little return. Such a differentiation could be termed “situational discrimination.”

But there is another kind of discrimination at work in this world, and the current media blitz coverage of the Winter Olympics and promotions featuring Olympians serve to elevate our awareness of this differentiation. The reality that presents itself is that we all play on an uneven field. Some individuals have a large, bordering on huge, dose of athletic talent and others have little in comparison. This differentiation could be termed “aptitudinal discrimination.”

I am a living example of a “have” who is also a “have-not.” I was born into a station in life where I was deprived of few opportunities. In addition, I was reasonably tall, athletic by nature and could run fast. However, I had a vertical leap that was measured in inches rather than feet. So, when it came to basketball, the NBA was never to be an option. I was favorably disposed in the context of “situational discrimination,” but did not fare well in basketball according to the measure of “aptitudinal discrimination.”

Our reading of the Old Testament certainly would bring us to the conclusion that the world was divided between “haves” and “have-nots” when it came to reconciliation with God or what we call, salvation. From Deuteronomy 26, we read that God delivered to the Promised Land only those who were descended from the “wandering Aramean,” that is Abraham. These were the Jews to whom the Law was given as the vehicle of reconciliation with God. As we read the litany assigned to the people by Moses, we see that the Jews may have been situational “have-nots” for much of their history, but they were always aptitudinal “haves” when it came to their opportunities to know God. Now as residents of the Promised Land they were “haves” both situationally and aptitudinally. But, of course, that meant that if you were not a Jew, a genealogical descendent of Abraham, you were out of luck; both a situational and aptitudinal “have-not.”

But being a “have” comes with responsibility. As Jesus said, those to whom much is given, much will be required (Luke 12:48). The Jews were given the Law as a revelation of God’s will and as the manner of life that is pleasing to God. However, knowing God and knowing what he expected came with the requirement to obey if they were to be reconciled to God. God told them:

“^{2b}I am the LORD your God. ³You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. ⁴My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you

shall keep, following them: I am the LORD your God. ⁵You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 18:2b-5).

Prophets, like Isaiah and the Psalmist, as well as the Apostle Paul, pointed out that when it comes to obeying the Law, all have gone astray, not just the Gentiles but also the Jews (Isaiah 53:6; Psalm 14:2; Romans 3:23). St. Paul piles on by saying that according to the law, *"it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified"* (Romans 2:13). History eloquently testifies to the fact that everyone in this fallen world is a "have-not" when it comes to the ability to obey the law.

However, there is an answer to our "having-not," and the answer is our Lord Jesus Christ. At the beginning of chapter 10, St. Paul expresses this in his concern for his fellow Jews.

¹Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for [the Jews] is that they may be saved. ²I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. ³For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. ⁴For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Through Christ there is "righteousness for everyone who believes." The Apostle goes on to tell us that everyone enters the category of being a "have" through faith when it comes to our reconciled relationship with God. It is true of all believers that the "wandering Aramean" is our father, in that Abraham is our father in faith. St. Paul tells us,

¹⁶For this reason it depends on faith..., not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—

²²[Abraham's] faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." ²³Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification (Romans 4:16-17,22-25).

But with becoming a "have" also comes additional responsibility. While the Jews had the law as the revelation of God, and therefore, were required to obey the law, we who through faith in Christ are given the opportunity for reconciliation with God also are required to do something. With the gift of the Good News comes the requirement to proclaim that Good News to others. We are to believe "with our heart" and "confess with the mouth." We are not just to have faith but also proclaim it (Romans 10:8).

We may follow our father Abraham through faith, but it is only when we proclaim that faith that we are following Jesus. Jesus calls us to follow him and then describes his mission, using the words of the Prophet Isaiah:

¹⁸ *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

As followers of Jesus, our orders are to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ Jesus, which is the “word of faith.” Through faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the perfect mediator of reconciliation between God and us, everyone can receive the offer of eternal life. ¹⁴*“But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?”* (Romans 10:14). The answer is, only through the proclamation of those who already believe. Therefore, Christianity is not a private personal affair but a public mission; a missionary religion.

It is God’s will that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13; Joel 2:32). It is also God’s will that all nations will call upon the name of Jesus so that everyone might have the offer of reconciliation with God. So it is that Jesus gave us this commission before he ascended to the Father: ¹⁹*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you* (Matthew 28:19-20).

If we are to follow Jesus, then the mission field for our ministry must be everyone. As Mary Ann Thomson wrote in Hymn 539:

*O Zion, haste, thy mission fulfilling,
 To tell to all the world that God is Light;
 That he who made all nations is not willing
 One soul should fail to know his love and might.*

*Proclaim to every people, tongue and nation
 That God, in whom they live and move, is Love;
 Tell how he stooped to save his lost creation,
 And died on earth that all might live above.*

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen (BCP, p. 101).

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on February 21, 2010, the First Sunday in Lent, Year C.