

Sunday, October 3, 2010
Lectionary 27
Proper 22
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2:1–4
Psalm 37:1–9
2 Timothy 1:1–14
Luke 17:5–10
Year C

I.N.I.

In 1989, brothers Bert and John Jacobs designed their first tee shirt. They knew nothing about the business. They sold shirts on the streets of East Boston and throughout the East Coast without much success. Then in 1994, they printed 48 shirts for a street fair in Cambridge, and they all sold out. The design for those shirts was a smiling cartoon figure called Jake, also known as the optimist. Now their t-shirts are everywhere, with images of Jake throwing a Frisbee to a dog, or showing a glass to be half-full. I got one for Father's Day with Jake grilling on the barbecue. And the name of this company, which is the tag line on all the t-shirts? **Life is good.** <http://www.lifeisgood.com/about/>

A competitor company to Life is Good started in 2006, dedicated to life's little screw-ups. While its stated intention is to make people smile (and presumably sell tee shirts), it does acknowledge that life is not all peaches and cream, one big party. Its website philosophy states *Life is not about what status we claim during our time, it's all about how we pick up and move on when the chips are down. Life isn't all about roses, it's got it thorns along the way too.* And the name of the company, with its cartoon figure wearing a scowl on his face with his hand dismissing the vagaries of existence? **Life sucks.** <http://www.lifesucksinc.com/about.html#mission>

Which are you, a glass half-full kind of person, or a glass half empty?

Biblically speaking, I think there is room for both kinds. There is a place for rejoicing, and a place for lament.

Habakkuk, the erstwhile prophetic book of a mere three chapters, would have worn a life sucks tee shirt. The bully Chaldeans were taking over Judah, on behalf of the looming Babylonian Empire. The ruling Assyrians were bad enough, but their starpower was on the wane and there was a new dictator in town. That meant more mayhem for God's people. So Habbakuk the prophet took his grief out on God. With hope all but gone for Israel, their land overrun by a nation that would beat them to a pulp, the very idea that their chosenness by God would get them safety was fizzling. The oracle Habbakuk saw was gloomy, like a dire diagnosis of cancer for a healthy athletic teenager who had staved it off with surgery and chemo. Why pick on the young, God? Why not someone who has lived a long life? Your idea of justice, God is messed up. What was supposed to be justice gets put in a dunk tank. WORD OF GOD, WORD OF LIFE.

After the oracle declaring that life is going down the tubes, Habakkuk waits for a word from God. He climbs up to a high place in order to see it coming from the mountaintops. And what he gets, the answer that comes is counter to the life sucks language. But it isn't exactly life is good either.

It comes out like the father advising the impatient son, the son who can't wait for the change to come, who wants success, happiness, or the latest gizmo yesterday, because today is too late!

The Lord says to Habakkuk in his funk, put the vision up in neon. Blast it on the web. Actually the Lord says put in on tablets (in big print) so that someone running by can read it, because that was the media of the time. Ours would use Facebook, email distribution lists, and also a large sign (in big print) so that someone driving by can read it. And what does it say? What would the Lord's logo look like? Perhaps a cartoon figure holding hands in blessing: "There is still a vision." Or even better, "the righteous live by faith."

That's it. That's it? Well, it was just the thing for Paul in his letter to the Romans. It was just the lightning bolt that hit Martin Luther in the face.

This idea of faith as the key to unlocking the hiddenness of God's will and ways really was the way through life, whether life is good or life sucks. It is the gift that Jesus Christ freely gives to those who extend their hands in joy, like Jake the optimist, or to those who throw their hands up in disgust, like Habbakuk.

What it is, really and truly, is just, simply, life. It is life in God. It is life that Jesus invites disciples and outsiders alike into, a way of being that takes who we are and what we have and blesses it, makes it holy, grows the little seeds that we plant and water, and makes them a tall sturdy oak. Jesus, at the conclusion of his own journey toward Jerusalem, ends up on two crossbeams of wood. But for us with a little faith we come recognize this cross as the tree of life.

Today's Gospel starts out with fearful disciples, who are stuck on Jesus' warning them about leading children astray being worse than drowning with a rock hung around your neck. Jesus' words about forgiving a chronic sinner eternally are pretty hard to take. "So help us to increase our faith," they cry. And Jesus doesn't put a silly grin on his face or a scowl. He speaks truth about life, life in God, life with him that makes miracles from small potentialities, and life which responds to God's invitation to serve.

Some days that life, life in God will sparkle and shine. Some days that life, that life in God will seem like a flashlight running low on batteries. But it seems to me that participating in that life is what counts, even if all you feel like is a little seed, or a worthless slave.

Rather than merely a set of propositions, isn't the faith declared in Habakkuk and modeled by Jesus is a way of life that trusts God above all else, and which waits to see how God comes in God's good time, not according to our agendas or priorities?

Thomas Long writes about living truly when he tells the story about the small seminary community in Finkewald Germany headed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the 1930's during the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer proposed a rule for life in that community, for how faculty and students alike would talk. As an expression of life in God, no person in the community he said should talk about another Christian in secret, even when the intent is to do good. It was a way to live in

truth. Well, as you might guess, it didn't work out so well. Though they tried, Bonhoeffer's seminary community was not able to abide by the rule. Long says "But by simply trying, failing, and trying again, the members of that community gained deep insights about the constructive and destructive power of words and were renewed in their commitment to honor other people in everyday speaking."

Faith for the long haul is born out of communal life with Christ that carries on, week in and week out, in festive occasions, in laborious meetings, and in Sunday School classrooms.

Thomas Long concludes that "one learns how to talk and think and act in Christian ways by living in the midst of the Christian community, becoming tangled up in the messy business of working with, learning with, worshiping with, serving with, talking with, and hanging around other Christians." p 35

So, you who are here today at Bethesda. Will you take the pledge to wait for the word from God, as long as it takes? Will you, once it comes, practice displaying it in a variety of media, especially as you speak to others? Will you in cries of lament and cries for help also be consoled by the company of others? Will you, when all is said and done, recognize the power of God at work in little things like a morsel of bread and sip of wine, a forgiving word from a friend, and imagine a tee shirt with a figure holding hands in blessing with the logo "the righteous shall live by faith"?

I.N.I.