

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 10, 2011  
Lessons: Exodus 5:1-2,6-9,12-14,22-23 and Romans 8:5-11

## A HANDFUL OF STARS

I am starting with a poem of Louis Untermeyer's that may sound irreverent and, I believe, is meant to sound that way. It's called, "Caliban in the Coal Mines," with the name Caliban taken from the earth creature in Shakespear's play, *The Tempest*. Untermeyer's Caliban is also an earth creature in that he spends his days down in the depths of the earth in the darkness of the coal mines, but he is a very human person with some questions for God. Another poet, Shelly, wrote famously, "God's in His heaven, all's right with the world!" Not so for this human earth creature, the coal miner who speaks not just as an individual, "I," but with the "we" of many human creatures of earth who toil well below the levels of luxury or even comfort enjoyed by those their labor enriches -- privileged people who seem somehow closer to the warmth of God's blessings.

GOD, we don't like to complain;  
We know that the mine is no lark.  
But — there's the pools from the rain;  
But — there's the cold and the dark.

God, if You had but the moon  
Stuck in Your cap for a lamp,  
Even You'd tire of it soon,  
Down in the dark and the damp.

God, You don't know what it is —  
You, in Your well-lighted sky —  
Watching the meteors whizz;  
Warm, with a sun always by.

Nothing but blackness above  
And nothing that moves but the cars ...  
God, if You wish for our love,  
Fling us a handful of stars!

The Christian response is our gospel which proclaims that God does "know what it is" to be down here on earth and to be hungry, frightened, or miserably alone. God knows because God cares for us and empathizes with us, which is a prophetic truth long denied by people of privilege who did not wish to feel obliged to God to empathize themselves with the poor and disinherited of their societies. Our Christian doctrine of the Incarnation insists that God does in truth know what it is to be a creature of earth and to be put into the hands of the brutal. The question, then, is why so many people even in places where Christianity predominates do not understand that God both knows and cares, and why so many to this day are kept down in the dark and the damp toiling for the enrichment of others sitting warm and comfortable in the light.

The apostle Paul writes to the Romans of the need for Christians to dedicate themselves and their efforts in life to matters of the spirit rather than matters of the flesh. That contrast is very difficult for us here and now to understand rightly, and its meaning is easily missed or

abused. I read from the New Jerusalem Bible because it translates the sense of “things of the flesh” helpfully, as our “natural inclinations.” The human body is not evil or dirty or unfit for God to love; Paul says it is marked for redemption. The problem is that God made us capable of willing response to God’s love and each other’s need for love, and because we are made to respond willingly and freely, we are capable of rejecting the humanity for which God created us and living in contradiction to it.

Greed is natural, but so is sharing. Kindness is natural, but so is cruelty. Human nature is very animalistic because biologically we have animal bodies but with a powerful will to autonomy no animal possesses. This will to autonomy is the “You shall be as gods” temptation portrayed for us in Genesis. Because we are not in fact autonomous but need each other more than we like to admit, and because we are vulnerable to many forces we cannot control and some of the worst of them come upon us from within our own bodies, we are always tempted to pretend to autonomy by seeking to make others serve our desires. So it is that people with wealth, prestige, and influence in society are tempted to regard themselves as a higher level of human beings. The people down in the dark of the mines are the Calibans, the laborers, the “little people,” while those up in the brightness of luxury and, they are quick to add, of decision-making responsibility are the VIPs, the “very important persons.” A Caliban cannot be a benefactor but only a friend, never a patron but just the person who sticks with you when you’ve been knocked down and kicked around.

In their years of bitter slavery, the Israelites were Calibans – earth creatures made, they were told with words and whips, to toil at the pleasure of their betters. In the end, we are all Calibans, for we are dust and to dust we return. What lifts us up is not wealth, prestige, or influence but self-giving love. Jesus was a Caliban, an earth creature of flesh and blood, a man with no wealth, prestige, or influence. He had no power to control other people’s lives and desired none. He is the Caliban who got crucified in Rome’s brutal method of public humiliation and death by torture. He is the Caliban God raised to be the earth creature who inherits what heaven really is in the triumph of self-giving love.

Pharaoh is a god who knows how to control the Calibans that toil under his authority. He controls them with quotas. That’s how the New Jerusalem Bible rightly translates what others render as the “daily requirement” of bricks to be made. That’s a quota, and quotas provide those in authority the numbers they need to hold their subordinates to what they call accountability with no excuses. That’s how authority dismisses the realities of working life, as mere excuses, because the quota is absolute and unquestionable. It’s a number and we think numbers are truth. So, Pharaoh takes away one of the raw materials needed for making the required bricks but keeps the quota the same, on the age-old theory that if workers have time to complain, they need more labor to shut their mouths. Such has been, not just for centuries, but for millennia the attitude and method of the tyrant. Today, we can do it all with computers and so generate an overwhelming range of quota numbers that can be manipulated at will for any result desired because the workers cannot possibly understand how the numbers are derived or what they really

mean, if anything. It doesn't matter what they mean because their purpose is to control. Real situations are dismissed as excuses made by lazy workers.

What does all of this about the cruelties of human societies and the unfairness of power structures have to do with setting our minds on the Spirit and caring about matters of the spirit? We need to recognize at last that autonomy is neither strength nor freedom but a delusion of self-centeredness that turns us away from God and against each other. Human nature is both kind and cruel, grasping and giving, spiteful and forgiving – because God has given us the capacity to respond to love willingly and to live with compassion rather than contempt for each other. The word *autonomy* is formed by combining *self* with *law*, so that I desire to be and may even pretend to be a law unto myself. It is the human creature's, "My will be done!" It worships God but to appropriate God's power, virtue, or supposed invulnerability, not for service or compassion, but for self-enhancement. For this reason, it is possible to be quite piously cruel, callous, and scornful of other people.

Jesus is a Caliban. The people living as earth creatures struggling to survive down in the dark and the damp need to know that God's Son is one with them and that God sees their miseries united with his. It is Jesus now left vulnerable and frightened because the Cumberland Women's Center has been shut down. It is Jesus who goes to school hungry and smelly but is still expected to measure up to the standards or be further shamed. It is Jesus who is always the wrong sex, the wrong color, the wrong age, the wrong IQ, the wrong orientation, the wrong something to sit with the better people. To seek the Spirit is to choose relatedness rather than autonomy; it is to accept our shared humanity and God's love for all us together. It is to see Jesus in each other.

Or, I should say more accurately, to seek the way of the Spirit is to see kinship with Jesus in the other person, whether or not we perceive anything Christ-like. Jesus calls to the sometimes very well hidden kinship in us, calls it out and speaks to it, summoning it to emerge and come forward. People who have lived with scorn and brutality or have been forced into a life of drudgery and resentment can be very resistant to understanding, compassion, or even simple respect. Fear may be the only form of respect they know, and if so, they may endeavor to make themselves feared. But those who have been beaten down can be just as resistant but in different ways. They may refuse to see themselves as persons of worth to be respected and loved rather than used. However hard and frustrating it may be, the way of the Spirit is that of living our relatedness to God and so also our relatedness to God's other children. Untermeyer's Caliban is proud as well as resentful; he may even be dangerous. He has his own kind of autonomy – that of the un-praised, the hard-pressed, the tough who survive down in the cold and damp. Our relatedness to Jesus requires justice in our societies and respect for people in our public policies. Autonomy seeks privilege; relatedness affirms equality and insists it be recognized in the public sphere. God has not given us a handful of stars to share but has given us hope, and hope shared with persistent respect is very powerful. Amen.