

It has been said that American society is a meritocracy. Now that's not a word I come across too often, but I came across it in the playbill for the play *Good People* currently at Geva Theatre. In a meritocracy people believe that hard work, good choices, resourcefulness and stick-to-it-iveness are the things that lead to a successful and happy life. Contrast a meritocracy to an aristocracy, where people are born into privilege and success. The play *Good People* is about people who grew up in the housing projects in South Boston. One person has made it, got an education, moved out and is a successful doctor. Another is stuck in the projects in a cycle of generational poverty. The play asks the question is it luck or hard work that leads to success? In my opinion the truth is some of both.

There are certainly benefits to a meritocracy. It leads to a good work ethic. Society rewards those who contribute the most to it. You work, you earn, you grow and you contribute. If you are lazy or a fool you end up losing. If you inherit lots of money and blow it, well, that's your loss.

I would hate to live in an aristocracy. I'd hate to have people above me in rank and power simply because they were born there. I suppose if they were good solid leaders that would be okay. But if they weren't, and I were a peasant under them, it would be a hard life. I'd constantly be struggling and suffering from someone else's bad decisions and have no way to change it. The good thing about a democracy mixed with a meritocracy is that you can chuck out leaders you don't like. Many will discover that this Tuesday.

Of course with any good system also comes bad things. All is great for you in a meritocracy if you are strong, smart, and good looking - that is, if you have lots of merit. But if you are weak, ugly and dim you don't have much of a chance. The same competition that keeps striving for people to improve casts many people to the side if they are of lesser merit. And, what good are you if you no longer have merit to offer.

My one colleague, the Rev. Jeff Hedin, who is pastor at St. Paul's in Pittsford is rolling toward retirement. He says that retirement, with its health care costs and nursing home costs,

is the time when society takes back everything you spent your life earning. Indeed, when a financial advisor talks to you about your finances and talks about saving for retirement isn't he or she basically telling you that you need to store up merit for yourself while you can because the time will come when you cannot generate more merit? So if you want to have some enjoyment without the ability to create merit you need to have some stored up.

Whenever I watch professional football I think about how short the players careers are - just a few years, several at most. Just a few short seasons between the time when they are mature enough to have high enough merit to get a spot on the team, and the time when injuries and age make them too decrepit to outmerit a fresh young player hungry for the spot. The fresh young player who is lucky - or maybe unlucky enough - to make it is always anxious for his spot. All it takes is someone with more merit to come along.

Do we not raise children these days to give them the highest merit gaining potential possible? Again, it makes for a strong, hungry, and robust citizenry, but it can lead to

exhaustion. It can be fun to work and to earn and to merit things. But I wouldn't want to have to exist like that forever.

In our second Bible reading we have an apocalyptic vision of God's ultimate judgment. It is an imaginative construction and I don't recommend anyone interpret it in too great a detail to predict the future. Many people do, but that isn't the intent of the passage. Instead, let your mind rest in the glory of the image. No hunger, no thirst, no tears, no pain, no scorching heat, springs of the water of life.

A little girl once complained to 20th century author C.S. Lewis that she didn't want to go to heaven. She'd heard teachings like Revelation 7:11, "And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.'" That sounded like being in heaven would be like having to be in church all day every day and that didn't sound like much fun.

She's got a point. While I love you all dearly and I hope worship is a worthwhile time for us all, I wouldn't want to have to be in church forever! Also, I wouldn't want to have to bow down and sing praises to God forever either. That doesn't sound like much fun.

But notice something in that passage from Revelation. Why are they giving God all that glory? Is it because God demands it? No. It is because of the merit of God. God provides fully for everyone always. There is no meritocracy, other than God's merit. No hunger, no thirst, no scorching heat - comfort, care, joy, wholeness, worthwhileness; all without meriting it.

How will that work? How will that be? I don't know. My imagination isn't broad enough. In this lifetime I am stuck in a world where for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. For every good a bad seems to form too. I only know what it means to feel good because I know what it means to feel pain. But in that future the bad won't have to be in order to feel good.

We find Jesus making similar promises in the words we have in our gospel reading. This is the beatitudes section of Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount. There he says blessed are all these people whose lives really aren't all that great right now. It would be like saying: blessed are the depressed, blessed are the divorced, blessed are the unemployed, blessed are the sick, blessed are the dying. These are not great things. In fact, Jesus' words sound silly. But underneath them all is the promise of a time when merit won't be necessary for happiness.

On All Saints Sunday we remember those who have died and gone on before us. I like the prayer petition we use at funerals that says, "Grant to us who are still in our pilgrimage and who walk as yet by faith, that your Holy Spirit may lead us in holiness and righteousness all our days."

For now we are in a pilgrimage - we walk, we journey, we work, we merit. But ultimately we will be freed from that burden.

Let us rejoice and look forward to the time when sorrow and sadness and worry and work and merit will be no more. God will

be the source of all things and there will be no separation. We
can rest and rejoice in the goodness of our God. Amen