

Pentecost 15 September 13 2020 Proper 19

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, as we come together this day, we seek your mercy and your love in your word. May this word open our hearts to your love and may our lives reflect your mercy this day and in the days to come. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Although for the last couple of weeks I've recounted the backstory of the Exodus, the prelude to the events of the Exodus itself, and in the telling of that tale I have spoken as well about the harsh tyranny of pharaoh, the cruelty and the brutality of his reign and the enslavement of the people of Israel and their oppression at the hands of pharaoh and his slavedriver. I have also told how God heard the cry of the people, in their distress and in the almost unconsolable pain they felt, and how God vowed to deliver the people from their bondage, to liberate the people of Israel from their enslavement. I have also spoken of the faithful who resisted the tyranny of pharaoh, those who like the courageous midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who refused to go along with Pharaoh's genocidal plans.

This morning we hear the culmination of this story: Moses is set to deliver the people of Israel from their oppression. God will deliver the people, bringing them through the midst of the waters but walking yet upon dry ground. But the Egyptians are overwhelmed by the flood. The chariots were stuck in the mud and the Egyptians were flung back into the sea where they drowned. I have always felt bad about this part of the story. It seems like it could have been more than enough to free the people of Israel without the death of so many of the Egyptians. Couldn't God arrange it so that they got stuck in the mud and just abandon the pursuit of the fleeing rag tag band of slaves bent on escaping Pharaoh's rule of oppression and be done with it? Why did they have to die?

Of course, we cannot use the story of the Exodus as history. It is a story of faith for the people of Israel and there are no other sources to back up any historical claims that it happened as recorded in the scripture lesson we hear this morning. But still, even as a narrative to outline the faith of the people of Israel, the question still stands, why does Israel's deliverance come at the expense of the lives of the Egyptians? Suppose that it shows the tragic depth of the ruthlessness of tyrannical leaders like pharaoh, that they will pursue their ends of oppression even if the cost is great in human life, a cost they have no trouble paying since they hold the lives of others in such low regard, and it shows the people of Israel as well that such brutal rulers are willing to go to any length to stay in power. This

is, of course, as harsh lesson, but one that is realistic even in our own day. Still, even with this lesson, I regret that that according to this story the price of Israel's liberation is so steep that it included the Egyptians whose lifeless bodies washed up on the seashore.

Jesus undertook to teach his followers with a lesson on the same subject in the parable of the wicked slave we hear this morning. This lesson begins with Peter's simple request to understand better the nature of forgiving. Again, using terms that would not have been possible in Jesus' and Peter's own day, Peter inquires about a member of the "church" sinning against him and the forgiveness he must show. This obviously comes from a later date, when there is a church with members, which would not have been the case while Jesus and Peter were strolling along the country roads of Palestine. So this is a lesson that our early ancestors in the church, those following the Way of Jesus, struggled with to come to the meaning for their life together. As they seek to come into a deeper belief of Jesus's teaching about forgiveness, Peter is their mouthpiece and they have him ask Jesus, "how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" And Jesus tells him, "No, not seven times but as many as seventy seven times!" First of all, a little Biblical knowledge is needed to fully understand this answer, that seven is understood in the Bible to be a complete set, like the seven days of the week. Therefore, what Jesus is saying is that forgiveness must be complete, and then complete again and again and again. There's no end to it. It is that completeness to which God calls us.

Then Jesus goes on to relate the parable of the wicked slave to further this point: the king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves finds one who owes him ten thousand talents. It is hard to calculate exactly how much "ten thousand talents" would mean today, but a fair approximation is more or less \$10 billion dollars. Yes, that's billion with a "B" This is definitely someone who would be one of those that our own senator Bernie Sanders chastises as the "millionaires and billionaires!" This slave is forgiven entirely of this astronomical debt, and then immediately turns around and sends a guy to prison who owes him something like \$15 or \$20 thousand dollars. Just absurd, but Jesus uses this absurdity to point out that we are to forgive because we have been forgiven: God has given us infinite mercy, and thus the claim of mercy on us cannot be denied, and we, too, are to forgive just as we have been forgiven.

This notion of forgiveness was central to the identity of the early followers of Jesus. Just a generation earlier, Paul, in addressing the early

Christians in Rome sought to show how God's mercy is at the very center of our faith. Paul's concern is for the manner in which the early church, even the congregation gathered in the belly of the beast under the very nose of the powerful Roman emperor, can build its unity and become an example of the way of love that Jesus gave them. Like the early Christians who sought to deepen their lives in God's mercy as they contemplated a question they believed Peter might have put to Jesus, this is the question of forgiveness and Paul's faith provides a great deal of light on the nature of God's call to us for the direction of our lives. To Paul, we should refrain from judgement if it tears down the community of Christ. As he says over and over, we are many, we come from many different traditions, the early followers of Jesus brought the various cultures and customs of their lives into their life of faith: they were Jews and Greeks, they were women and men, they were slaves and free, but brought together in the love of Jesus to share that love and life with others. Even in death, we stand together before God. For Paul, judgements that divide the community are toxic, standing as obstacles to the community Jesus calls us into in the way of love. Commenting earlier this week in the *New York Times*, the writer David Brooks noted that this way of love, "is a focus of attention. Love is a motivation to learn more about a person. Love is a reverence for the image of God in each person." For the followers of Christ, Paul believes, this way of love builds what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr call the "Beloved Community," in which all share mutual love for one another and show the glory of God's love in their lives.

As we gather together in the midst of the pandemic, still seeking to follow Jesus and to give thanks for our new life in christ, for a new direction in our lives to overcome the evil that surrounds us, I believe these scriptural lessons hep to orient us in our times. Yes, of course, we must exercise judgement, but only judgement that helps to build the community in love. I think that another way to frame this is to speak of discernment. How do we discern to way of love, how do we find this love that will bring us together and not divide, that will enable the fulness of life and not diminish our full humanity nor the full humanity and dignity of others? This discernment leads us to seeking the reverence for the image of God in each person. Recalling the forgiveness that is bestowed on us, God's gracious act of bringing us into the full love of Jesus, restoring us and setting us on the course to be the ones to put this faith into action, remembering this forgiveness allows us to put out faith into action, forgiving others as we have been forgiven, seeking Jesus' way of love for all. As we move further into the Fall, as we continue to do what we can in

our lives to put our faith into action, seeking to do what we can in our lives to stay healthy and to keep others around us safe and healthy as well, as we continue to pray and act on behalf of racial reconciliation in our land, may God grant us the grace to use this discernment in love to build up our community. As we remember the great love, mercy and forgiveness God grants us, may we open our hearts and souls in this same forgiveness to our sisters and brothers. And above all, may this way of love grow in our lives that we can move closer each day to the Beloved Community for all. Thanks be to God for this great mercy and grace in our lives and thanks be to Christ for opening for us the way of love. Amen.