

The Journey Begins

We seem to be always beginning. Or at least we have a tendency to speak about how we start our journey of faith. To some, that seems redundant. “We began long ago,” they might think. And that could be true. Yet, each day is a new beginning, a reaffirmation of the desire to be a disciple of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. So, once again, the journey begins.

Even though there are those of us who are more seasoned travelers on the journey of faith, we are constantly met with new disciples. Rather than being slowed down by this, we are rejuvenated by the zeal that new converts often bring with them. “The journey begins” then is a time of celebration and of hopefulness. We are looking forward to becoming the community that we long to be and are described as being by the very one we follow.

So, here in the late summer and beginning of fall, when some things are winding down and other things are starting up, it is time for us to remember who we are and to whom we pledge our ultimate allegiance. Let’s go back to our first love and embrace our God with passion and with joy.

We are also on the brink of the Season of Creation (<https://www.oikoumene.org/node/6282>), which means that creation and ecology will be a consideration in this series (and the next, as the Season of Creation goes from September 1 through October 4). It is up to you, of course, to determine how this will feature in the worship in your local context. But this is an opportunity to lift up the themes of creation care in a particular way throughout this series. It is a reminder that God works through the world as it is and that our call to be stewards and to care for creation is still with us and guides our worship and our work.

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Who Do You Say?

August 27, 2023

[Ex 1:8-2:10](#); [Matthew 16: 13-20](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

Out of nowhere, it seemed, as they traveled along, Jesus asked his disciples a question of identity. "Who do you say that I am?" It's a question we must answer again and again as we seek to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

We want to know God, as we begin our journey of faith. We want to be able to call God's name, to know something about God's nature, to be able to trust in God's presence as we seek to follow. Our worship this week can be full of names for and images of God, including the incarnated face of God that is Jesus the Christ. If you aren't in the habit of reciting a creed or affirmation of faith, this would be a good week to do so. Pick one that provides an image of God that speaks to you and your congregation. What aspect of God most resonates with the mission and ministry of your church?

If it fits in with the confirmation cycle in your church, ask the young people who are wrestling with these questions of faith and tradition to share their images of God. If they've written creeds or statements of faith, bring them into the worship of the church this week. Let them write the liturgy for the whole congregation to declare. Ask the children's department to invite the little ones to draw a picture of God at work in their lives and use these pictures to decorate the sanctuary and to guide the prayer and meditation time in worship. How do those who are truly beginning their journey of faith speak about or envision the God we all worship together?

Pay attention to the language of the songs you sing this week. How is God described? What metaphors are offered as a way to begin to comprehend something of the awesomeness of God? Let our music enlarge our understanding, rather than attempt to shrink God down into our comfortable ideas. Let's be risky in our language as we acknowledge both the immanence and the transcendence of God, both what can be known and what is unknown about the God we worship.

"Who do you say that I am?" Let there be an invitation to declare, even when there isn't a single answer, even when there is still sorting out to do. Even when individuals and maybe the whole congregation realize that words are sometimes inadequate to answer that question fully. Maybe the best answer is the silence of contemplation and prayer. Our faith declares that God will make God's self be known. Trust in that as you worship today.

PREACHING NOTES

Some years ago, I had to make regular trips from Indiana, where I was serving a church, to Tennessee where my aging parents lived. It was a long drive, so I had plenty of time to think and observe the world around me. One time, I remember seeing that the Ohio River had overflowed its banks to a significant degree. It was quite a sight, almost chilling in a way, as you could tell that there was destruction in its wake. Families were displaced, crops destroyed; and there was devastation on multiple levels and varying degrees. If not right there on US41 South, then somewhere else, up and down the river.

It certainly wasn't the first time the Ohio River had overflowed its banks. I'd seen it that high before. My Dad grew up in Memphis, which was a river town. I remember him telling me of the folks who lived along the Mississippi River and how they would regularly lose the simple shacks they lived in because the flooded river would wash them away in the rainy season. But what amazed me about the story was that these people would return and build, again and again, despite the destruction the river brought. I couldn't comprehend that. Why not move away, to someplace safer, someplace drier? "Well," dad would explain, "some of these folks were able to make a living on the river, fishing, scavenging, transportation. It wasn't just destruction that the river brought, it was life too."

Egypt was a river-based nation. The people were used to the rhythms of the Nile and were able to make good use of it. It was a source of life—a dangerous source of life to be sure, but a blessing, nonetheless. At least until those in power sought to change it from a source of life and place of blessing to an instrument of death and a symbol of terror.

That is exactly what the unnamed Pharaoh tried to do in our Hebrew scripture text for this week. "Throw them in the river." That seems incomprehensible, really—that a leader would be so afraid of these immigrants that he would recommend throwing them in the river. And this was a general edict. Did you notice that? He told all his people, "Whenever you see a Hebrew baby boy, throw it in the river." He was appealing to mob action and inflaming prejudice and suspicion. He was stirring up the populace with fearmongering and threats.

"But let the girls live," he said. "Why was that?" you wonder. Let the girls live because they couldn't do much? Because no one worries about girls? Because, well, because they are girls. Isn't that enough? No one can be so mean as to kill baby girls, could he?

I doubt that it was sentiment that caused Pharaoh to spare the girls. He spared them because he didn't think they were capable of causing him trouble. That means he wasn't paying attention, because two women got in the way of his first plan, and it was two women — one from his own household— who caused his ultimate downfall.

Pharaoh was just off base from the beginning. He wanted to turn the river, which was a source of life, into a place of death. That didn't work. He also wanted the women, the midwives who are bringers of life, to be instruments of death; and that didn't work. The little girls he didn't

think worth his consideration stood sentinel over a baby in a basket, floating on the river of life, a river of hope.

Now, this doesn't mean that what God intends for good, human beings can't turn to evil. Oh, how we wish that were true. But it does mean that if those who fear God, as Shiprah and Puah did (and no, it doesn't mean that they were more afraid of what God would do to them than what Pharaoh would do to them - in fact it means that they trusted in God's power and presence more than in Pharaoh's power and presence) can work to foil those who would misuse the blessings of God—if they are willing to take the risk and if they are willing to work for life and not for death.

I always thought the song "Down by the riverside" was about stopping work. But now I wonder if it is about changing the kind of work you choose to do. Maybe "gonna lay down my sword and shield" and "gonna put on my long white robe" is not really about being in heaven but about choosing to do the work of life and not of death. Maybe it is about making the choice to fear God and not Pharaoh.

"Down by the riverside... Ain't gonna study war no more... Ain't gonna work from hate no more. Ain't gonna ..." well, you decide. It's dangerous down by the riverside. But it is where life is. Let's go.

But if we are going somewhere of significance, we need a direction. Often, we need a guide or a leader, someone we can follow. As Christians, while we are sometimes called to be leaders, more often we are called to be followers. We have a leader, the one who shapes our lives and our mission and our ministry— the one who asked us who we said he was.

"Who do you say..." What better question could he ask? It is one of those "lay it on the line, put your money where your mouth is" kind of questions. Jesus draws a line in the sand and then asks us where we want to stand. We are a "take-a-stand" kind of people. We like the hero who will stand up in the face of opposition, the leader who will not waver. A common political liability is a capacity to "flip-flop." We want to vote for people who don't change their mind on issues of importance. (Never mind that it might imply holding on to something you realize is wrong - stand firm!! Shouldn't we allow people to grow and change and learn? Shouldn't we be relieved to know that even politicians can make mistakes and grow from them? – Sorry, editorial political comment there. I'll get back to the subject at hand.)

Certainly, taking a stand and making a claim is part of what is going on in this encounter between Jesus and his closest followers. But isn't there something more? The claim is only the beginning. And in fact, if you look closely, Jesus doesn't want Peter to take too much credit for his claim. You didn't figure this out on your own, Peter, you had help. The only way you are able to make such a claim is because God helped you. Even our fundamental statements of faith come as gifts from God, not from our own effort and our own knowledge or detective analysis. "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you," your own or anyone else's, "but my Father in heaven" (Matt 16:17).

Any voice can be an instrument of God. This means that our default position ought to be one of openness and hope. We can't dismiss anyone, no matter how unlikely a vessel of the truth of God the person may appear to be. We need to listen; we need to strive to hear God speaking; we need to get beyond our own limitations, our own prejudices, our own fears and hear God.

Now, Jesus doesn't ask us for an uncritical hearing and acceptance. We can, and should, discern the words we hear to test and see if the Word is within the words. Sometimes it is not, we all are aware of that. I believe that what Jesus had in mind with the keys of the kingdom was not a position of authority or power, but one of accepting a task. We are to constantly be searching to find that which is bound and that which is loosed in heaven. We are in the business of discovering and then reflecting the kingdom of God in our everyday lives. Jesus gave to Peter, and through him to the whole church, the responsibility of listening for and identifying with the kind of life that builds up, that makes whole, that leads others to a relationship, a partnership with Jesus. The keys of the kingdom ought not to be the weapons by which we keep people not like us out of the community. Instead, they are the tools of faithful living that abide in generous hospitality and invite others to know the way that we have found.

"But if that is the case," you might now be saying, "Why did Jesus end the episode with a warning not to tell?" Hmm, good question! I don't know. Sorry, not the answer you were expecting, I'm sure. I believe that there are two answers to the question you raised. First, there is the original answer. Jesus had a specific plan in mind for his own life and ministry. The disciples were participants in that plan, often without realizing it. And a part of the plan was the timing. Jesus was saying to the first followers that it wasn't the time for them to be announcing to everyone what they had been given to know. That time will come later. For now, it is sustaining knowledge for them. He seemed to be saying, "Hold on to it, remember it, it will save your life later."

We can't claim the same meaning. We can't be hearing Jesus saying to us, "It isn't time to tell the world what you know." In fact, to us, he has said the opposite: "Get on out there and tell." Young and old are called to the business of telling. So, we are supposed to just dump this verse, right? Well, dumping verses always makes me nervous. Instead, we need to rehear this verse. Maybe for us, it could mean what St. Francis of Assisi is reported to have said: "Preach always; use words if necessary." Maybe Jesus' stern warning to us is to not be casual with his name. Don't tell unless you are willing to live. Don't announce if you can't reflect. Don't bear witness with your words if your habits won't witness to him too.

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Who Am I?

September 3, 2023

[Ex 3:1-15](#); [Matt 16:21-28](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

Knowing God and making a declaration of faith is an important part of the journey of faith. But then what usually follows an encounter with God is an acute and often painful awareness of self. Moses, following his father-in-law's sheep in the wilderness, far away from a shady past, stumbles across a God who calls him to a mission of liberation. One of his many objections is that he doesn't know who this God is. "Tell me your name," he asks. Who are you, so that I can answer when they ask who sent me." But alongside that question is a realization that he does not measure up to this ideal or to this calling. "Who am I," Moses asks again and again in an attempt to crawl out from under this call. Our awareness of self is an important element of the journey. But like our understanding of who God is, our understanding of ourselves changes and grows with time.

Our first awareness is our inadequacy. Confession is an appropriate response for those who are entering into a relationship with God. "Send me," says Isaiah in the temple of the Lord. "Get away from me, Lord" is fisherman Peter's response to ferrying Jesus around in his boat. Our experience of unworthiness is often a starting point in our discipleship. But it must be the final experience of unworthiness. As we grow closer to God, we begin to see ourselves as worthy because we are made worthy by God's love and transforming grace. We see the delight God takes in us as a part of God's creation, blessed in so many ways. Our prayers begin with confession but then can move on to commitment, from acceptance of grace and forgiveness into intercession and calls for justice and for peace. We don't stay in a state of shame but move into grace because of God's call on our lives.

So, we can celebrate our call, "We've a Story to Tell to the Nations," as a way to remind ourselves that we are not just in this for ourselves, but for the transformation of the world. We pay attention to the world around us and ask how we can care for all of creation, protect those who are being hurt by climate change, those suffering droughts and fires, those being flooded and swept away by hurricanes, and those communities destroyed by earthquakes. We are in the business of stewardship of all that God created. And while we may feel like our resources are few, we can do our part; we can rise to the occasion; we can pay attention.

Who are we to shoulder the burdens of the world? Especially when we get it wrong more often than right, it seems. We remember that we are just beginning, again or for the first time. We recommit ourselves to the call to become disciples.

PREACHING NOTES

Do you recall seeing one of those spectacular sunsets, where it looks as though God dipped a brush in the orangey-red colors of the divine palette and flung streaks of that bright color across the blue canvas of the sky? I remember many times driving to and from a speaking engagement or gathered event seeing a world bright and clear and feeling the invitation to look with wide-eyed wonder at the beauty and intricacy of creation—the fields of wildflowers that grew not because someone planted them, but because that was where they were supposed to grow. So, they did. With wild abandon, they grew, not caring if anyone saw them; they burst forth in color because color was what was within them.

At one point on that long stretch of concrete and asphalt, a hawk winged his way across four lanes of traffic. It was probably looking for the little field creatures that scurry through the hedgerows alongside that busy highway. But it appeared as if he was passing judgment on the four-wheeled conveyances that were hurrying through this beautiful day, seemingly concerned only with the destination. He soared with a glint in those piercing eyes, as if he knew a secret that we have forgotten.

One wonders if Moses was enjoying the scenery as he wandered around on that mountain, following his father-in-law's sheep. Did he bother to look at the majestic mountain pressing upward into the cloud-strewn sky? Did he see the wind-carved sandstone sculptures in the rocks that surrounded him? Or was he more worried about what he might step in as he made his way up the mountain, not quite as spry as the sheep he followed?

Well, at least that bush caught his eye. We can thank God for that. Who knew that on that mountain in the back of beyond, Moses would stumble across God? Not Moses surely. He wasn't looking. He didn't want to be found, come to think of it. He was in his self-imposed witness protection program, hiding out from the authorities back home, who had his name plastered across post offices from Cairo to Goshen.

He let his temper get the best of him. Call it righteous indignation if you want; call it an act of justice - protecting one of the downtrodden who was being oppressed. But Pharaoh's police force called it murder, and even the adopted grandson of the king himself couldn't get away with murder. So, he ran for his life. Across the desert, he ran with blood dripping from his hands. Or at least it felt like it. His dreams were filled with a nightly re-enactment of his crime of passion. Had to have been. At least for a while. Maybe as the years passed, the hot sun and dry dust eroded his memories enough to honestly forget. Maybe he forgot what he did, where he came from, and even who he was. I think that was his goal. This rescued Hebrew baby boy who grew up in the palace of the greatest king in the known world wanted to forget everything—except how to follow sheep up a mountain. “That’s all I am,” he thought, “all I’m good for, following sheep through the dusty middle of nowhere. Where nothing happens. Where no one goes.”

Except for God. "Take off your shoes," the bush said. The bush? Yeah, the bush. The burning but not consumed bush. Burning but not consumed? Maybe that's what drew him. Maybe after all those years of burning and being consumed, Moses wanted to see how it was possible for something to burn and yet not be consumed. Maybe it was the promise; maybe it was the hope that caused him to step aside long enough to have his whole life turned upside down and inside out.

"I've come to help," said the bush, or the angel in the bush, or the voice that wasn't the angel or the bush but seemed to transcend both. "My heart is broken with the pain of my people, so I have come to help. To set them free." "Great," thought Moses, "what's a bush gonna do against the might of a nation like Egypt?" "I've come to help," says the voice, "I'm sending you." "Say what," stutters Moses, "I just follow sheep. I'm not a hero." "I will be with you," says the voice as the flames crackle in the silence while Moses chews on this bit of news. "And who are you," he ventures, wondering if that "not consumed thing" applied just to the bush.

He made his way back across the desert to the land he had abandoned, but this time with a mission, an impossible mission to be sure., You have to wonder if he rolled that name over in his mind with every sandy step: "I am who I am," said the voice. "I will be who I will be. Tell them 'I am' sent you. 'I am' will be with you."

He shook his head at the strangeness of the thought. And then he noticed a hawk flying low in front of him. It wheeled and circled, and, at one point, it seemed to have a glint in its piercing eyes, as though it knew a secret Moses had almost forgotten or had just been told. And his burden seemed lighter for a moment. He lifted his eyes to the hills and then the sky above, and it seemed his direction was mapped out with orange-red clouds.

"God forbid it, Lord!" The God who seemed so present in creation, who worked through all of Moses's doubts and hesitations and promised to be present with him throughout this saga, now calls him to move, to follow, to make the journey into the valley of death and out the other side. "Tell them, 'I Am' sent you."

Now things get messy. Now things get painful. Now we are walking into a hornet's nest. God forbid it, Lord. Did you notice how quickly Peter falls from grace in our Gospel text? Just last week, just a few verses earlier, Peter was top of the class, getting pats on the back and applause from the crowd. Now ... "get behind me, Satan." Talk about your basic fall from grace. And look, he was just trying to stand up for his leader, the one he just called the Christ, the anointed one. He couldn't comprehend that this Christ would suffer and die, that anyone could get the upper hand on him, that anyone could wield power against him.

Matthew says he rebuked him. We have some of the words, the "God forbid" bit. But what else did he say, you can't help but wonder. I think he said what he had already said: "You are the Christ! The Son of the living God!" Like a preacher who doesn't know what else to say and says, "let me say that again!" Peter's conception of what the Christ would be and do didn't fit the story that Jesus was trying to tell them. It just didn't compute in his brain. So, he dared to tell

Jesus that he was wrong about himself! That takes a certain amount ofchutzpah, don't you think?

The same amount that we carry around most of the time. Let's face it, we have a pretty clear idea of what our savior should be doing and how that savior should look and act. And Jesus, if we're honest, doesn't fit the mold very well. We'd pick any number of superheroes or secret agents over this carpenter's kid from Galilee. Though he does rise to that sort of hero level occasion when he says he's coming back with an army of angels. At least that is what it sounds like he's saying. But then he goes and confuses us with that last verse in chapter 16. "There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (v.28). Did he miscommunicate the timing? Why are we still waiting for this angelic repayment?

Well, read on. The next chapter begins with the story of the Transfiguration, where a select few got to see ... something. Again, we think in terms of battles and punishment and power and winning. And Jesus consistently shows us something else: presence, community, connection. We're looking at the wrong things, it seems. Moses was stumbling around the wilderness looking after sheep and almost – only almost, thankfully – missed the presence and call of God in the midst of the created world. Peter was stumbling around the Galilean countryside and missed – for a time – the presence and call of God in the person he came to know as the Anointed one. Maybe the God we seek is right in front of us all the time, and if we only opened our eyes to the world that vibrates with the divine presence, we might know who calls us.

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost - What Is the Sign?

September 10, 2023

[Ex 12:1-14](#); [Matthew 18:15-20](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

As we launch or continue our journey of faith, are we called to look for signs of God's presence or are we called to be a sign of God's presence? The answer, as you might expect, is yes! We are the ones who are trying to be tuned into God's wavelength, listening to God's broadcast. Therefore, we look for the signs that God is at work in and around us always. One of the things we do when we gather for worship and for fellowship is to celebrate those signs and share them with one another. Is there space in your worship for folks to share "God-sightings" within the body? Or might we call for such sightings ahead of time, on social media perhaps or in small groups within the church. We are encouraging one another to be alert to the movement and activity of God in our lives.

Let our prayer time not just call for God to act around us, but to give thanks for the activity that is already happening. We draw one another's attention to how God is at work. What we can sometimes find is that we are often better at seeing God at work in the lives of those around us than we are at seeing the same in our own lives. That's why we need the community to direct our attention. As we celebrate the ministry of those in our congregation, we can tell them how God was seen in their words and deeds, in their caring and loving. Share that with one another this week.

But we can also avoid the tendency to look inward only to see God at work. We might be surprised by where and from whom we encounter God's presence when we open our eyes to what is around us. It is a reminder that we don't have an exclusive hold on the grace and love of God. The Spirit is not within our control. But we can observe its passing through the lives that are changed, the moments that are blessed. How do we tell those stories in our worship this week?

We are more than passive observers, however. We are active presenters, active signs of God's presence in the world. We commit ourselves again this week at worship to presenting the goodness of God in the world around us. We do that best by how we care. We care for one another and seek reconciliation whenever possible. We care for God's people everywhere by giving and helping and loving. We care for the planet by adjusting our lifestyle to minimize our negative impact on the environment. We care for the whole family of God by advocating for a just distribution of the resources that God has given for our use and by standing with those who have been pushed to the margins of our society and with young men of color who are part of a mass incarceration. We care and are called to care as a way of being a sign of God's care for creation. What is the sign? It is us.

PREACHING NOTES

When I was a kid, we had different clothes for church and for the rest of our lives. Sometimes there were school clothes that we had to keep separate from everyday clothes, but even that got a little fuzzy. But church clothes were distinct. Oh, once in a great while if we were going to some fancy gathering of some sort, then we were told to wear church clothes. But since my dad was a pastor, even those fancy things were really church things, just during the week. Or a party with church people. So, it was still church, in a way.

The funny thing about church clothes is that they were more than just clothes. Yes, they were nicer looking and worn less often. And yes, we took the time to polish our church shoes on Saturday nights. But I knew even as a fairly young child that when mom told me to wear church clothes, she was asking for more than just what I put on my body. "Church clothes" didn't just look a certain way, they were worn a certain way. She was asking me to put on my church attitude. She was drawing attention to the fact that certain things were expected of me in this outfit. And I don't just mean to keep it clean. Or maybe I do mean that. Keep it clean in thought and word and attitude. Keep it clean in how we treat one another. Keep it clean in what we say about people behind their backs. Keep it clean.

That is the baby that got thrown out with the bathwater, I'm afraid. When we went away from church clothes, did we go away from church attitudes? And we have gone away from church clothes. I remember hearing a choir director tell her young folks to wear church clothes to a concert that they were performing somewhere. And then she had to describe church clothes. Most of them were used to dressing for church pretty much like they always dressed. Those young folks had never even heard the phrase, "church clothes."

I know, I sound like some old geezer who remembers how things were back in my day. I'm not really complaining, just observing. In fact, I think that maybe it is a good thing that we don't have church clothes anymore. At least, it is a good thing if we got rid of them because we believe that we are always in our church clothes and our church attitudes.

I'm pretty sure that Jesus didn't want us to compartmentalize our lives into church and non-church. I'm pretty sure that Jesus wants us to live every day as though we were in the presence of God - because we are. And that we live every day as though we are loving our neighbor as ourselves - because we are.

Yet we need reminders. We need to take a moment and take off the clothes of this world with all the expectations that go with that outfit and put on our church clothes again. This process of reminding, of taking the time to reset our thinking and acting is the answer to the question: "Why do people need the church?"

Matthew is the only gospel writer who uses the word, "church." And it appears in only two passages—here and in chapter 16 where he tells Peter that he will be the foundation of the church. That means it is pretty significant that the word appears, and we ought to pay

attention. On the other hand, the word “church” appears seventy-two times in the epistles (if you count Revelation as an epistle - and all the occurrences of the word are in the first three chapters, which are the letters to the seven churches. Oh, and the book of Acts, which is the companion piece to the letters - or the acting out of the conversations in the letters). That means that Paul and the other letter writers are very concerned with helping us be the *church* that we are called to be. So, there were lots of choices there.

Here in the Gospel, it is the function of the church to be a force for reconciliation. You could argue that, from a gospel perspective, it is the only function of the church. We are in the business of putting things together, of healing the breaches between people, of overcoming that which keeps us apart. It is about making sure that no one feels like an outsider.

“Wait a minute”, you might say, “there is a call to ‘outsider-ness’ in this passage.” We have been taught to believe that we are to give reconciliation our best shot, to be sure, but that if it doesn’t work, then we can boot folks out. That is what verse 17 is saying, isn’t it? Is it? Verse 17 says that if the one who has caused the offense refuses to be reconciled, then treat the person “as a Gentile and a tax collector.” “Boo, hiss,” we say, “toss them out.” Except, wait a minute, how did Jesus treat tax collectors? He put one on his team. How did Jesus treat Gentiles? He preached to them; he invited them. Yes, there was an incident or two where he seems to be a bit harsh to a Gentile, but then after a reminder, he turns and welcomes.

In other words, despite centuries of church history, I don’t think these words give permission to cut anyone off. Instead, we treat them, the sinners, the breakers of the covenant, with love and invitation. We are always, always trying to heal what is broken. We might have to change tactics in dealing with those who refuse to be a part of the community. Jesus treated those inside the community much differently from those outside. And in fact, he was worse with those inside! Worse, as in harder on; worse as in having higher expectations; worse as in being ready to call them out and point out their failings. The outsider was encouraged and invited, challenged to be sure, but with love and gentleness.

So, when Jesus says to treat them like outsiders, he wasn’t saying to turn your back on them. He was telling us to change tactics. And all along, he was saying we ought to be doing this together. This reconciliation thing is a team effort, not an individual exercise. It is what we are about.

Wait a minute. Is the function of the church reconciliation? Or is the function of the church to worship God? Yes. Duh. And no, I don’t mean that we really have two functions. There is only one. It is in our reconciling that we worship God. It is in our worship of God that we are healing brokenness, we are putting people back together with God and with one another.

Did you realize that the invitation to the Communion liturgy says, “Christ invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another”? Loving Christ (worship) - repenting of sin (reconciling with God) and living in peace (reconciling with one another) are all part of the same thing - worship and reconciliation.

And we are to live this worship/reconciliation outwardly, in an invitational way. The church is a reminder to the world that we are all in need of a savior. And the church is the evidence that living in the “being saved” community is a more holistic, more reconciling, more joyous way to live.

Why do people need the church? Because we forget to put on our church clothes. Or wait, maybe it isn't church clothes, but church dinner. At least if you read the text from Exodus, you'll see there is a verse that references clothes, but the rest of the verses are about eating. Or maybe not about eating, but about how we eat. Are we getting etiquette lessons here in the Hebrew Scriptures? Sort of. If etiquette means “a prescribed or accepted code of usage in matters of ceremony, as at a court or in official or other formal observances” (according to dictionary.com), then yes. We're getting etiquette lessons, not so that we don't commit a social *faux pas*, however. No, these lessons are so that we understand what it is that we are doing, and why. It is so that even our eating is mindful.

Yes, the text is establishing a ritual practice that came to be called Passover. But underneath the specifics of this ritual is the calling to see our whole lives as beholden to God. We are called to see everything we do as an act of worship. How we dress and how we eat are important to our faith. In this era of ecological awareness, we are invited to pay attention to the impact our way of life has on all of creation. We are encouraged to see ourselves as participants in a larger drama, a more profound story than just what is immediately in front of our eyes.

There is another level as well. We are invited to participate in these rituals, to wear these clothes and eat in this way, not just to make sure we are aware of our impact on the world and those around us, not just to make sure we are aware of God's presence and call upon our lives in everything that we do, but we are also called to do these things so that others might see God through us. We are the sign that God is God and God is still at work in the world. We are the sign that what we say about God shapes how we live in the world and how we treat those around us. We are the sign.

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost - How Many Times?

September 17, 2023

[Ex 14:19-31](#); [Matt 18:21-35](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

Our series ends with a question. It isn't our question, of course, it is Peter's question. "How many times must we forgive?" This is one of those questions that we know how we're supposed to answer, but it is harder to do in practice than in theory. When we gather for worship and hear the story from Matthew where Jesus tells Peter that we forgive 77 times, or 70 times 7, or in fact, we just keep forgiving, we smile and nod and clap our hands. "Of course," we think, "we worship a forgiving God, and we know we need God's forgiveness over and over again." But then we realize that this means we also must be forgiving of those who offend us, again and again, perhaps. And then we wonder if that's even possible.

We aren't living in forgiving times. Even a cursory glance at the news will tell us that. When we're divided into us and them, forgiveness rarely enters the conversation. Do we hear this call from our Lord as a call to live counterculturally? Are we to swim against the tide of anger and vengeance and hatred, and present a different face to the world? Isn't this risky, this forgiveness thing? Well, yes. If we're doing it right. It will be risky, scary and world-changing; it will be transformative if we take this call seriously.

Can we give space in worship to accept forgiveness and to offer it? Can we call one another to set aside grudges and suspicions and prejudices long enough to even consider what it means to be forgiving? How can we challenge the congregation to see the personal impact this grace would have on us and those around us? Perhaps we need a workshop on forgiveness, or at least space to understand, to learn about what forgiveness is and what it isn't; and there might not be a way to do that during worship. But we could plant some seeds; we could issue the invitation to consider what a life of forgiveness might look like in our real-world living. And most importantly, perhaps, we can give the Spirit space to work in us and on us as we wrestle with this forgiveness thing this week.

We can be challenged by the Gospel text in concert with the Old Testament text. We can examine our reaction to hearing the relief and the joy at the drowning of Pharaoh's army, for example. Then we can hear Jesus's response to Peter while those emotions are still fresh within us. How might that prepare us to hear the word proclaimed today? How might it bring us to the place of prayer and then surrender to the activity of the Spirit in our own souls?

We can be honest with ourselves and with God as we realize that we too often have asked that same question, "How many times must I forgive?"

PREACHING NOTES

Is there some irony here on the part of the lectionary preparers that they paired Exodus 14, the recounting of the Egyptian army being swallowed up by the sea in retribution for enslaving the Hebrews (or Exodus 15, the song of celebration for the victory over the Egyptian army), with Matthew 18, which is an account of Jesus' call upon us to unlimited forgiveness? What in the world are we supposed to do with that? What we usually do is pick one and run with it. Mixing them together is difficult, to say the least. So, let's look at the one that is in our wheelhouse.

Jesus had been talking about reconciliation and then about how he abides with those who agree, who live in community with one another. So, Peter saunters up, eager to show that he'd been listening. "Hey, Jesus," Peter says, "suppose someone in the family does something really bad to me, how often should I forgive?" OK, he really said, "sins against me," but sin in this case is a breach of covenant, an offense against a brother or sister. Then Peter plays his ace, "as many as seven times?" Most teachers would have said that you have to forgive three times to follow the law. So, Peter goes way out on a limb and says seven times. I can't help but think that he expected Jesus to say something like, "Hold on there, Sparky. Forgiveness is a good thing, but let's not get carried away. I mean three is pretty good. Four is out of the park. Seven? Don't be ridiculous!"

But, as we know, that isn't what Jesus said. He did math right there in Peter's face. Seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven. Which is it? Doesn't matter, it wasn't math; it was and is grace. Jesus wasn't giving us a checklist, a counter so that whatever high number we get to there is a limit, and once we reach it, then pow. No, he was trying to talk in terms of infinite grace. He was stepping into eternity for a moment and describing a new reality. There is a different way of keeping score. Instead of measuring slights against us, we begin living by grace offered. Instead of counting the points of division, we measure out the ways we can come together. It is a different scale, or more appropriately, a different way of living.

Then Jesus takes the time to explain why. And he does it through a story, as you might expect. Or should have expected, anyway. And this one is a doozy. If you want to have a debate as to whether Jesus had a sense of humor, this parable is prime evidence. As the story goes, a king wanted to settle accounts with his slaves. So, he calls one of them who owes ten thousand talents. I'll pause here. Ten thousand talents. A slave who owed ten thousand talents. OK, those online sports betting apps are really getting out of hand. Depending on which historian you read, this was either the gross domestic product of a relatively large nation or the equivalent of 150,000 years of average wages. In other words, there is no way that a slave could have amassed such a debt. It's hyperbole, to say the least. But the debtor slave's response is, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything." One hundred fifty thousand years would take an inordinate amount of patience. But for some reason, the king decided to just wipe away the entire debt. I guess he didn't want to wait 150,000 years for his money.

But then the plot thickens, and the man who was forgiven the enormous debt stumbles across a fellow slave who owed him one hundred denarii. OK, if a denarius was a day's wage, that was one hundred days' worth of cash—not insignificant, to be sure. But Jesus says, "Do the math; 150,000 years equals fifty-four 750,000 days of owing. Almost 54 million to 100, seems outrageous, to say the least. No wonder everyone got their noses out of joint. Now the first guy is going to jail to be tortured until he can pay the entire debt. Ow. So, fun story; Jesus left them rolling in the aisles with this one.

Besides the bad behavior or bad decision-making on the part of the first slave, what's the point here? That we're all in debt? Or that we've all been set free from a debt that we couldn't pay in 150,000 years? Salvation is being set free to live as though we were already a part of the kingdom of God, because we are. In which case, our default ought to be forgiveness. We ought to lead with grace. That's the invitation that Jesus issues to us here. not that we count how many times we should forgive someone until we reach some magic number that then allows us to walk away or, worse yet, wreak some vengeance on them for being so mean to us.

As an aside, Jesus doesn't say we've got to sit there and take it. He doesn't say that we've got to put ourselves in harm's way in order to be the forgiving types that he wants us to be. We can be forgiving from a distance; we can protect ourselves and others in our care by removing ourselves from a toxic situation. We can be set free from suffering and from oppression. We can escape from Egypt.

Certainly, the liberation of a people from bondage in Egypt is a powerful witness to the justice and care of God. Yet it is hard not to be a little squeamish over the accounting of even an enemy force being wiped out in the crashing of waters as the Red Sea returned to its rightful place. Or the account of the enemy force getting stuck in the mud of the Sea of Reeds as the new-fangled sign of the arms-race superiority Egyptian chariots proved too heavy for the marshy ground. But then, as noted above, the lectionary preparers gave us a choice this week and allowed us to skip over this detail and instead go to chapter 15 and join the party of celebration over this mass death. The rabbis struggled with this story from the very beginning, and indeed the witness in the Hebrew scripture as a whole is very divided over this harsh and all too prevalent reality. On the one hand, we should celebrate the end of wickedness. On the other hand, can we celebrate such killing? Should we sing with such exuberance of "the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea"?

The Jewish Chronicle had a fascinating article about this very dilemma:

<https://www.thejc.com/judaism/features/why-did-we-sing-when-the-egyptians-drowned-1.54039>. I am especially intrigued by the rabbinic teaching that Pharaoh didn't die in Egypt but fled to become king of Nineveh, which explains that when Jonah rolls into town, he was so willing to repent and beg forgiveness. It is worth wrestling with these issues, particularly in a time of rampant Christian nationalism that is often quick to pick up the language of violence and war. Our own consciences have been stirred by reflection on the glorification of violence by

such writing as Mark Twain's "The War Prayer": <https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/19-american-empire/mark-twain-the-war-prayer-ca-1904-5/>.

This might explain why even the lectionary gives us alternate readings here. Initially, we have Exodus 14 or 15, but then we have a new layer of alternate texts which goes back to Genesis 50 and the story of Joseph's brothers coming to the realization that they did great harm to their brother, as annoying as he was, and might suffer as a consequence. A troubling story, but one that ends a little more happily than that of the Egyptian army.

One approach the preacher might take, should she or he decide to preach from this text, would be to place the emphasis – whether in the account or the aftermath – on God as the primary actor in this event. This is not an act of vengeance by the people, whether the oppressed or the liberators. The danger here, of course, is presenting God as a warmonger and a harsh judge, for which there is ample scriptural evidence. It would be important to lay alongside the counter argument of the God we see in Jesus, who is also evident in the Hebrew scriptures.

Both Hebrew scripture stories give us a real-world setting in which to wrestle with the call to unlimited grace and forgiveness outlined in Matthew 18. In the face of enemies across the aisle or across the sea, how many times should we be willing to forgive?