

Bible Study
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18, Year A
September 10, 2017

[RCL:] Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Exodus 12:1-14

After reading this text, I imagine flipping through the most recent church recipe book printed to raise money for the renovations to the parish hall. After perusing the “Rector’s Rhubarb Pie” and the three versions of “Heavenly Hash,” I flip the page and discover a recipe for “Passover”: roasted lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Warning! Do not boil the lamb or eat it raw. (I cringe at the thought of a parishioner eating a lamb raw.)

Not only are there cooking directions, there’s even a dress code and disposal instructions. Sandals on, loins girded and a staff in hand – seems like an easy enough outfit to throw together. All the leftovers needing to be burned is also a cinch, since that’s what will happen if I’m roasting *anything* over a fire. Further instructions make it clear that the food must be eaten in haste, much like a teenager after football practice. All the old jokes about the Episcopalian who used the wrong salad fork are thrown out. There are no salad forks for this meal. In fact, there aren’t any forks at all.

This recipe is certainly for an extraordinary circumstance. That is, the circumstance of getting out of Dodge fast. The original diners were getting out of town to end their long enslavement to the Egyptians. The people of God were to mark their own doors, lest the Lord kill their firstborn along with the Egyptian firstborn.

Suddenly, my comedic musings on this passage grind to a halt. The lamb must be killed, and its blood used to mark the doorposts of each Israelite home so that the Lord would pass over as he struck down the firstborn children and animals in Egypt. This would be a night of death and destruction, of plague and sorrow. The fury of the Lord will rain down on the land of Egypt while the people of God sheltered in their homes, quickly eating a roast lamb, unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Then, when the aftermath of the death and destruction turned each Egyptian home into a morgue, they would slip away into the desert.

The Passover was a feast that commemorates a violent event after a series of violent events in Egypt. As we have learned from our own nation’s history, human slavery does not just fade away with time and good intentions. Slavery is maintained by violence and usually comes to a violent end. The command to remember the slavery and to remember God’s deliverance is a way to remember God’s grace and deliverance.

- Do you remember a time when you felt delivered from a place of hardship? How do you commemorate that deliverance?

Psalm 149

This psalm captures the crazy exuberance that is possible for the people of God. The joy in this psalm is shared by the whole community. This is not private revelry; everyone is involved.

Music abounds, and everyone whirls around, dancing. The whole community is singing at the top of its lungs when we notice a peculiar thing about the choir. Everyone in the choir is holding a two-edged sword. They have swords to execute judgment on oppressive kings.

This psalm reminds me of the *Magnificat*, in which Mary sings that God raises up the lowly and pushes down the proud. In Psalm 149, it is the festive choir that introduces God's justice in the world.

All this leads me to conclude that the praise and worship that we do on Sunday cannot be disconnected from what God is doing in the world throughout the week. God's interest in justice flows from the praises of his people. For me, this helps connect my worship with real, practical problems in the world that God is moving to fix.

- What are some of the issues in the world where we can see God's justice?
- How is your worship of God moving you toward seeing the world's inequalities?

Romans 13:8-14

Before he became a follower of Jesus, the great father of the church, St. Augustine, read these words of St. Paul. After reading them, he shut the book, then he observed, "By a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away."

I confess that I had a different reaction to these words in Romans. My reading of this passage, at first glance, made me feel like the apostle is chiding me about how I spend my free time in the evenings. I confess that his words seem to be rather meddlesome, even 2,000 years after they were written.

How could this rather negative message be to St. Augustine a message of light and serenity? Perhaps I should remind myself that the power of the Holy Spirit is always to bring the right word at the right time. For St. Augustine, these were the right words for that moment.

Perhaps they are the right words for our moment, too. We are reminded in these verses that "salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." Every time we move toward the light of God, we are moving deeper into the Kingdom of God. We are easily distracted by the neon lights that signal the presence of what tourist brochures call "nightlife," but we never mistake neon lights for the sun.

For Paul, it is still night, but the dawn is almost here. Get ready, he says, to live the way we will live for eternity, in the light and warmth of God.

- What are the worthwhile pursuits of life that you might be missing by staying up too late? What distracts you from being a light to a dark world?

Matthew 18:15-20

“Mr. Peters, we apologize for your long wait at the front desk. In order to keep your loyalty here at our hotel we would like to offer you a complimentary three-night stay at any of our worldwide locations. We will also throw in a couple of spa passes and trays of chocolate-covered strawberries.” Indeed, these are words I always like to hear. I also like to hear that I’m getting a big refund from the IRS. What I don’t like to hear is that I sinned against someone. I don’t like it one bit. I’d much rather talk about something else.

One of the most unpleasant activities in human life is confrontation. Especially when a relationship is at stake. I can come up with a million excuses to put off and avoid confrontation with someone who is hurting me or my community. Jesus clearly states that the responsibility to confront lies with the person who is offended. The community is slowly drawn in to the controversy, but not too soon.

The goal of this confrontation is to “gain your brother.” The goal is always reconciliation. Even when a member is declared a gentile and tax collector, the goal is reconciliation.

How does Jesus treat tax collectors and gentiles? He engages them with truth and love. In fact, Matthew, the traditional author of this gospel, was a tax collector. Jesus called Matthew just like he calls all of us. He calls us to a ministry of reconciliation, even when it’s difficult and painful. I have observed confrontation many times, and I can report that the goal of the confrontation was rarely restoration and reconciliation. Too often the goal of the confrontation was to initiate a separation so everyone could go on with their lives.

Reconciliation is difficult. The cross, the ultimate symbol of reconciliation, stands before us and behind us as we pick up the phone and ask if we can meet to talk about something that happened.

- Can you think of an example of a confrontation that resulted in reconciliation? What are some practical steps to take that may result in reconciliation after confrontation?

This Bible study, written by the Rev. David Peters, originally ran for Proper 18 in 2014.

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