

Bible Study: Proper 18 (A) - 2020

September 6, 2020

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

Exodus 12:1-14

Today's reading is a central scene from the story of God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from their bondage in Egypt. Last week we heard the beginning of that story – the calling of Moses as the people's leader. Between then and our reading today Moses and pharaoh (Egypt's political and religious leader) have been engaged in confrontation and Yahweh (the Hebrew's God) has sent a series of plagues upon Egypt to try to persuade pharaoh to release the Hebrews without further complication. Pharaoh has refused. The instructions to the Hebrew people related in today's reading are in preparation for Yahweh's final act, which will reveal his power over Egypt and set in motion the Hebrew people's deliverance from pharaoh. Yahweh promises to spare his people from the slaughter that is to ensue if they obey the instructions that we hear today. The blood of their Passover (paschal) lambs will be a sign to Yahweh of their devotion to him.

- How do you relate to this story as a Christian?
- Whether you read it as history or as holy story, so much of our Christian life revolves around the idea that Jesus became our own paschal lamb. What does it mean to be such a lamb? What choice does such a lamb have in its sacrificial role? What does this mean for your understanding of who Jesus was/is?
- How does this story influence the way that you think about the Eucharist?

Psalm 149

This psalm is an exuberant song of praise, beginning with a three-verse introit of praise and leading quickly to the psalm's climax in verse 4. The NRSV translation of verse 4, which tells us the reason for this hymn, says, "For the LORD takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory." This reversal of fate theme echoes the reversal of fate that the Hebrew people in Egypt experienced by way of the Passover, which we have just read in our earlier reading from Exodus 12. While the dark, vengeful verses in the second half of the psalm may be troubling to our modern ears, we must remember that for the ancient Israelites, tribal/nationalistic survival was part and parcel of their religious experience. Their political enemies, who worshiped altogether different gods, were generally considerably more powerful than they were. This psalm consecrates the victories of a poor, humble underdog to the power of divine will.

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

Continuing in Exodus just a few chapters past where we left off with the Passover instructions, after the Hebrew people have escaped captivity and are headed to their promised land, they receive – by way of Moses – the ten commandments. While the Jewish people developed an extensive code of laws, these ten were the first – and Jewish tradition recognizes them as the basis for all other commandments. It's significant then that in today's lection, Paul, a learned Jew himself, boils the entire law down to one word: LOVE. This echoes Jesus' command as told in the Gospels (Mark 12:31, Matt. 22:39-40) and reverberates in places throughout the New Testament.

So often we think of love as an uncontrollable emotion that we either feel or we don't. But what does it mean for love to be a commandment? How is practicing love different if it is an obligation . . . to God?

The text shifts to a reminder that salvation is nearer today than it has ever been before. Christ's light is with us, and the end of the world as we know it – the eschaton – draws near. Scholars agree that Paul thought that the end would come, quite literally, at any moment. Thus, his admonishment to the nascent Roman church toward love for one another and away from selfish, less honorable pursuits reflected his conviction that the judgment day was eminent. Concern for anything else was futile.

- How then, are modern Christians, living almost two thousand years later, to understand Paul's message? Is loving one another (still) enough? Are you waiting each day for the eschaton? If so, how do you keep your sense of anticipation alive? If not, does Paul's belief in its eminence affect the way that you hear his message? Either way, can you think of anyone in your life that you "ought" to love more, and how might you do that?

Matthew 18:15-20

Scholars believe Matthew 18 to be a collection of diverse sayings that relate not so much to the historical Jesus but to the post-Resurrection church. It is only in such a setting that instructions of this sort would make sense.

Jesus' instructions require his followers to be bold and assertive. If someone has wronged you, Jesus calls you neither to acquiesce nor to appeal to authority. Rather, you are to confront the offense head-on, first in private and then, only if absolutely necessary, within the broader circle of the community. This method is respectful of all parties: the offended seeks justice; the

offender is given the opportunity to mend the situation quietly, and the community is spared from unnecessary drama. In first century Israel, verbal contracts would have needed to be witnessed by the community in order to be best enforced. But here Jesus affirms that, even if two or three are gathered, heaven is alert to the business being transacted. Thus, the discipline and reconciliation of the congregation can proceed between individuals. Christ is present.

These gospel instructions reveal themes from our earlier readings. The Jewish Passover celebration that continues to this day, inspired by the Exodus event, requires that members of a family who sit together at table be reconciled with one another before bread is broken. Similarly, in our own practice, the gathered congregation corporately confesses its sins, asks for forgiveness, and exchanges the peace before sharing our own Paschal feast – the Eucharist. Doing so is an expression of our Christian love for one another – the fulfillment of our obligations to God, as Paul has affirmed for us in Romans. During our Eucharistic celebration we are reminded of a different sense of time, not the immanence of something yet to come but the experience of all that is happening now – binding past, present, and future into one moment, as the community experiences the love of Christ through the sharing of a holy meal.

- Think about the people in your congregation, or family, or maybe even your workplace – people who may have wronged you. Do you think you can be as bold as Jesus seems to call us to be? What are the dangers? What might be the rewards? What if someone came to you with a complaint about something you had done? Could you listen? Could you love? Could you love that person and value their hurt feelings more than you value your need to be right? What would it take for you to hear God’s voice in the other? Plagues? Pestilence? A Paschal Lamb?