

Scriptures:

Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21—Miriam’s song at the crossing of the Red Sea

Second reading: Romans 14:1-12—included in the body of the sermon

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Well, a preacher always faces the task of guessing three days in advance what she’s going to talk about—naming her sermon and putting together the bulletin. Usually it syncs up well. But not always exactly. So on Wednesday I thought that I would do an illuminated reading of our second text.

An illuminated reading is something we’ve developed in my own faith community, and it means reading through a text bit by bit, line by line, and kind of giving a running commentary while you go.

So I thought I would do that on the Romans text. But I don’t think that’s the right thing to do. So even though your bulletin says an illuminated reading, what you’re going to get is a reading, and may God illumine your hearts.

And then later I’ll be reflecting on the text in more general and broad-sweeping terms.

So, let us listen with our whole hearts to this reading from Romans...

**Romans 14:1-12**

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.

Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.

Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God."

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

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Here ends the reading. May our hearts be illumined.

Well, first I want to thank you for inviting me to be with you in worship today. It's very exciting to be with you this morning, then this afternoon to be also beginning a period of worshipping here with my own faith community. Your bulletin says we're gathering at 4:30, and that is when we gather to set up the space, but our worship is at 6:00pm. So if you're telling your friends about us, take note of that. That we actually worship at 6:00 this evening. And we're happy to be part of worship with you this morning as well.

So our first story that we heard from Exodus. This is a story that we're likely very familiar with. The story of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt. We know, we remember that God calls Moses to lead God's people, the Israelites to freedom from Israel. And we know that Pharaoh is the ruler who can set them free or keep them enslaved.

There are also task masters in the story, the part that we didn't hear today, but we know this. Task masters who manage their enslavement, and soldiers who enforce their enslavement.

Pharaoh's heart we know is hard, until his heart breaks at the death of his own eldest son. And then he sets the people free. But he re-pents, he rethinks. And he sends the soldiers out after the fleeing slaves to bring them back into captivity.

But of course we know, the soldiers are not able to bring the people back into captivity. God intercedes on behalf of the slaves. The waters, which had parted to let the slaves flee, crashes back in and kills the soldiers.

Generally when we hear this story, we identify with the slaves. And sometimes, I can really sing with Miriam and celebrate liberation from slavery! This is a core story of our faith. Our God is a God of Liberation. Hallelujah. This is something that I believe with all my heart.

But today I am called up short by this particular story falling in the lectionary on this day.

Context creates meaning, doesn't it? Today is 9/11, ten years after a catastrophe happened. And if you've been listening to the news at all this week, you've surely heard about it, as I have.

What bothers me about this story falling on this day is the danger that it carries within it for mis-application, mis-interpretation. On one level the story of the parting and the closing of the Red Sea could be understood as a story about the destruction of enemies.

This causes us to wade into very perilous waters ourselves. We have to ask ourselves difficult questions like, who is my enemy? What is an appropriate way to treat an enemy? What is God's relationship to my enemies? Does God have enemies?

These are personal, spiritual and religious questions, that have social implications.

I think we also have to ask questions about the biblical story itself. Is this a story about Justice? Or is it a story about Salvation? Is this a story about Retribution? Or is this a story about Liberation? Is there a difference between these two kinds of stories? Do we apply them differently, when we think about the world if we understand them as a story of Justice, or Liberation?

I worry about one easy interpretation of this story, one mis-application of this story. Which goes something like, "Well, clearly God kills our enemies, so it is right that they should die, and if they aren't dying, then we should do God's work and kill them."

There's a kind of self-righteousness that can come with this kind of interpretation. And it's very dangerous given other things we know about the biblical testimony, about what Jesus says about our enemies. How Jesus asks that God forgive even those who killed him, when he spoke from the cross, saying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

I think that this interpretation of the story is actually the antithesis of what the story intends. I think this story intends to tell us that God is in control, that God has the power to make things right, to redeem the world, to restore it to balance, to equity. I think that it is a story about Liberation.

When Miriam sings a song of gratitude at the liberation of her people, she sings that the enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.'

The enemy said this. And so, we have to ask ourselves a question, when we get to know who the slaves are who being liberated, and we get to know who the enemies are, who are drawing their swords, who are having this kind of thinking. We have to ask ourselves who are we in this story. And our answer to that question will affect how we interpret it.

As I said before, if we are the fleeing slaves, then we are liberated! And we should dance! But if we are the soldiers enforcing the domination of power-hungry rulers, like Pharaoh, then we, in the story, receive the consequences of that violence turning back on us.

Some might think that we are God, in the story, that we're in a position to decide who will die and who will live.

While I don't think we are ever God, but I think that on some days we're the fleeing slaves, and I think on some days we are the soldiers. And on some days we are the oppressed, and on some days, we are the enemy of the oppressed.

So, is this story about Justice? I think that depends on what you mean by justice. Sometimes we think of justice as a kind of retribution, that someone gets "what they deserve." It's justice based on punishment, an eye for an eye kind of thing. I would call that Retributive Justice, a justice of retribution.

Well, you know, it does say in the Old Testament, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But I learned something very interesting about that text. That text was not to say that we must take an eye for an eye, or a tooth for a tooth. That text was meant not to demand some kind of retribution, but to limit, limit, the kind of retribution that humans are prone to do.

That text has the intention of "don't take more than an eye for an eye. Don't kill for an eye. Don't kill for a tooth." You know, have some kind of balance when you're moving through the world and trying to decide what is right. I believe in that eye-for-an-eye thing there's something about God's call to mercy, and to a limitation of violence.

We are prone to think of justice in a "retributive" way. Our criminal justice system is based on this understanding. Justice requires figuring out who is guilty and then imposing punishment. The focus is on wrong-doers getting what they deserve, their retribution.

But I've been reading lately about another kind of justice, Restorative Justice. Retributive Justice focuses on retribution and punishment, while Restorative Justice focuses on wrongs being righted, harms being healed, and it focuses on the process happening in the community while this healing and restoration takes place. This is actually a movement. People are doing this in schools and sometimes in some criminal situations—a movement of restorative justice.

Confronted with the Exodus story, thinking about the nature of God and God's justice, I thought, God's justice is a Restorative Justice.

I don't believe that God is a God who punishes for the sake of punishment. I believe that God is calling us always toward love, always calling us to restore the kind of

balance and graciousness, and generosity that is the image of God at the core of our being.

The Exodus story does teach that there are consequences when humans try to maintain slavery, or enforce oppression. God can't always save us from our hard-heartedness. But God is always trying.

God is always calling us toward a more whole, healed, peaceful existence. This is the meaning of the Hebrew word *shalom*, peace. It's more than just a lack of war. It's about holistic salvation and health within a community and within individuals.

In the book of the prophet Isaiah, Isaiah speaks about God's justice, and describes it like this:

Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
and right action [righteousness] abide in the fruitful field.
The effect of righteousness will be peace,
and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for ever.
My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,
in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places. (Isaiah 32:16-18)

We have this vision here of justice that has to do with wholeness, and with right actions. That is God's *shalom*.

It's rather scary for a preacher to take up topics as big as this, because I *surely* do not have answers for you today about the world in which we live. I've read a lot of anxious blogs this week about pastors all over feeling like they're not equipped to address God's people on a day when we remember such grief, and horror. So what I hope to provide here is not answers. I certainly don't have it right. But I hope I am able to provide a paradigm, in which we can shift the lens through which to look at a text, like this Exodus story, and other biblical stories.

When words like enemies, and justice come up together, things can get scary, because we can tend to slip into this righteousness thinking. An antidote I found for that is from Pastor Martin Neimoller, who was a pastor in Germany during WWII. He's the pastor who has a somewhat famous quote about how (and this is paraphrased) "when they came for the trade unionists, I said nothing. When they came for this kind of person, I said nothing. When they came for that kind of person, when they came for the Jews, I said nothing. And then when they came for me there was no one left to speak up for me." But I found this other quote by him. He said, "It took me a long time to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. He is not even the enemy of his enemies." And we have a model of that in Jesus.

Evil does not make sense to us. It should always distress us when we encounter it. I can get tied up in knots sometimes, trying to explain it away, or trying to say, "how can evil exist, when we have a good and powerful God." I heard the well-known

German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann speak about this, and he said (and I'm paraphrasing him), "We *should* struggle with the problem of evil. If we ever figured out how to explain it, as though it made sense, we would stop resisting it."

But God calls us to resist it. Evil does not make any sense. But where is God when bad things happen to good people? Or when bad things happen to *any* people? God is with us. God is with us, going through it with us.

And that's one of the things that I love about incarnational theology—the idea that God comes into a human body, Jesus, in order to be close to us. The Body of Christ. We become the Body of Christ ourselves. And God, in the form of the Holy Spirit is still here with us now, guiding us to let God work through our very bodies, for the healing of the world.

Teresa of Avila lived in the sixteenth century (1515–1582) and she wrote:

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.

Incarnational Theology. That is not to say that God is limited to working through us. God also works outside human beings. But God is with us, God accompanies us, through all of life—the good and the bad.

Today is a day to remember some good and some bad. We remember how people drew together after 9/11. How they helped each other. How they had courage. But we also remember our losses. The 3,000 in the Twin Towers. But the 65,000 also, in Afghanistan since then. And the hundreds of thousands in Iraq. We remember them and we grieve those losses. And we grieve that violence.

There is this remembering, there is grieving, and there is drawing near to one another and extending the hand of friendship, the touch of comfort, the healing of community. This is what we are called to do. To be the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

And this is what our Romans text reminds us. Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to a God to whom we can turn for strength when we feel weak, for courage when we feel afraid, for guidance when we feel lost, and for forgiveness when we have messed up.

We belong to the very body of Jesus, whom we can try to follow. And if the original 12 followers are any model, then we're okay. Because that was one motley crew.

They never really understood what Jesus was talking about, questioned him at every turn, doubted him up one side and down the other.

But they loved him. And He loved them. And they tried to follow him. He washed every one of their feet. Even Peter, who tried to resist him, and even Judas, who he knew was about to betray him. Jesus served and loved Judas, even knowing what Judas would do.

As it turns out, Jesus loves his enemies and prays for those who persecute him.

Our Romans text ends with this:

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For *we will all stand before the judgment seat of God*. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God."
So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

This bending of every knee—it's not something which can happen by force, because force does not lead to praise. Force leads to resistance.

Love leads to praise. Gratitude leads to praise. Wholeness, and relationship lead to praise. Forgiveness leads to praise. Honor and dignity lead to praise. So, in saying that every tongue shall give praise to God, it means that all will truly feel that love, that gratitude, that relationship. There's no forcing people to bend on knee to God. There's inviting one another to feel that love of God.

On the occasion of the 9/11 Sharon Salzberg wrote a reflection for the Huffington Post. She said that her godchild, Willa, was three years old on Sept 11, 2001. She lived 2 blocks from the WTC. When the London metro was bombed, Willa was 7 years old. When she heard about it, "her eyes filled with tears and she said, 'Mom, we should say a prayer.' Willa began with, "May the bad people remember the love in their hearts."

Salzberg is a best-selling author and a well-known teacher of a practice called Lovingkindness meditation. She wrote, "I think of Willa and her prayer -- when I have been hurt or harmed, when I myself make a mistake, when I feel the need to try to start over, however difficult that may feel. Whatever has happened or is happening in our lives, may we all remember the love in our hearts."

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/09/prayer-for-911_n_955705.html#s353813&title=Sharon_Salzberg

As Jesus washed the feet of Judas, I wonder if he might have been thinking, "May the bad people remember the love in their hearts. May Judas remember the love in his heart."

Knowing that some days we are the slaves fleeing in Exodus, and some days we are the enemies of freedom, the soldiers... *(And I don't mean to say that all soldiers are bad. Soldiers live with honor and do a good thing, so don't hear that in what I am saying.)* But sometimes we're the oppressed, and sometimes we're the oppressors and we need to be very thoughtful about that.

Knowing that the line between good and evil does not go between people, but goes through the center of the human heart, we need to be thoughtful.

And so I pray that we remember the love in our hearts. And may we bend our knee to God, and feel loved and forgiven and grateful, so that we can praise.

May we seek, and find, lovingkindness in each of our days, on this day, and all days. May it be so.

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I invite you now to join with me in saying what it is that we believe with the statement of faith that is in your bulletin:

**Affirmation of Faith**

(from the Iona Community in Scotland)

We believe that God is present  
in the darkness before dawn;  
In the waiting and uncertainty  
where fear and courage join hands,  
conflict and caring link arms,  
and the sun rises over barbed wire.  
We believe in a with-us God  
who sits down in our midst  
to share our humanity.  
We affirm a faith  
that takes us beyond the safe place:  
into action, into vulnerability  
and into the streets.  
We commit ourselves to work for change  
and put ourselves on the line;  
to bear responsibility, take risks,  
live powerfully and face humiliation;  
to stand with those on the edge;  
to choose life  
and to be used by the Spirit  
for God's new community of hope. Amen.