

Sermon – “The Weight of Letting Go”

Sunday, September 6, 2020

Scripture Readings: Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-20

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Our first scripture reading comes at the end of a series of plagues that have beset Egypt as it has continued to hold Israel enslaved. Here God tells Moses and Aaron of what is about to follow as Egypt bears the worst punishment yet, how the Israelite people will be passed over when this thing occurs, and how they are to remember this in all the years to come. Hear now God’s Word in Exodus 12, verses 1 through 14.

¹ The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ² This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³ Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴ If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵ Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶ You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷ They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸ They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹ Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰ You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹ This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. ¹² For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

¹⁴ This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

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Our New Testament reading shares from the middle of a series of Jesus’s teachings about sin and forgiveness. Hear God’s Word to you in this passage from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, verses 15 through 20.

¹⁵ “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

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One of the hardest things to wrestle with about forgiveness is the idea that it would be given where it is not deserved. We don't like seeing free gifts go to people who don't deserve them, or negative consequences pass away from someone who *has* well earned them. Now I'll say straight off that there is a certain way in which this objection is absurd from the start. The entire point of forgiveness is that it is not deserved. Forgiveness is *never* deserved. If the person has fully earned your goodwill back, has paid off the debt, there is nothing to forgive. The very definition of forgiveness is letting people have a pass on things for which they could be held to account; that is, it is giving them something they are not owed.

But there is a piece of our objection to forgiveness that...wait—you say we *don't* object to forgiveness? We *like* forgiveness?

Sure we do. As a nice, warm, fuzzy theoretical concept, we do. When it is applied to us, we do. When it is applied to people to whom we can relate, people with whom we empathize. But take any set of people on whom you think we really need to bestow forgiveness, and there is a set of people on the other side of the same coin that you probably think need to be strictly held to account. We'll go straight to the pair of conflicting examples from today's America that might put people on edge: If you think people taking to the streets should be forgiven for getting destructive and violent, as I have heard suggested, you probably think police officers, by contrast, should be held unbendingly up against the highest standards. If you think people in uniform should be forgiven when they go too far in their use of force, as I've heard others suggest, even when people die, and even when it is part of a pattern, then you probably think rioters, by contrast, should be held 100% responsible for their violations.

The interesting thing to note about this split is it reveals our attitude toward giving people a break isn't really much about a belief in forgiveness at all. A better description of our general outlook in life is that we *don't* want that much forgiveness to happen. What we really are doing most of the time is thinking that one set of people—whatever people we most closely relate to—is not really all that much in the wrong to begin with. And that is a very different thing from thinking they should be forgiven. Mostly we all tend toward the idea that forgiveness is something we are happy to see applied when someone colors just a bit outside the lines, but a factor we are angry to see applied when someone is significantly in the wrong.

That is, most of us by instinct *do* object to serious forgiveness. That warm and fuzzy concept of forgiveness attracts us only about as long as we are able to forget that the whole world isn't made up of people ready to hold hands and come together; there is really awful stuff out there, true meanness, ugly, nasty exploitation, outright evil being done. It makes us angry to see what is being done to people, and we don't want to see people getting let off the hook. It is that which is at the center of our general objection to forgiveness.¹ We can't help but often find forgiveness objectionable precisely because it is the opposite of what is deserved.

¹ We have a personal objection, too, which is that it costs us something to forgive others, but that's a matter for another time.

There is legitimacy to that, and it is this: we yearn for justice. I do not think the impulse in us is actually wrong to want people who have been ground into the dirt to be lifted up and the people who did that do them to be cast down. From the songs of Moses and Miriam in the ancient Exodus story that follows the Passover and escape from Egypt,² through the Magnificat of Mary,³ up to our own similar hopes for a reversal of fortune for anyone who is on top because of having taken it all from others, we struggle against the idea of evil people prospering, while others suffer, and we *should* struggle against that. And we call God good and give praise to God when we see evidence that God, too, hears and cares about the cries of the wronged and oppressed, and we take hope in the prospect that God, and not random chance in a harsh universe, will ultimately be in charge of what all the consequences are for everything, judging it all with true fairness.

Our yearning for justice is not wrong; it is a moral voice which echoes out of the perfected self we are meant to be. But it also may not be entirely survivable by the selves we actually are, the selves we have found ourselves to be in the world as it is today. The phenomenon I named a moment ago, whereby people are only okay with forgiveness when it comes to the people with whose situation they can empathize, largely because they don't really see those people as being all that bad...but where they are ready to call for the strictest accountability for others, whose sins they can see clearly? That should give us pause. Our experience should tell us that pretty consistently, other people are not very good at seeing their own sins and the sins of people like them. Which suggests that we are almost certainly *also* not very good at seeing the full extent of our own sins and those of people whose situation we feel connected to.

We pray for justice, thinking about how God's true justice would bring down what is wrong. We can see what is wrong, in part: mostly other people, of course.

Others pray for justice, too, thinking also about how God's true justice would tear down what is wrong. And they can see what is wrong, in part: largely us.

Assuming all of us are at least partly right, and we probably are, then we have to be careful what we hope for here. We all are standing on pretty shaky ground if we think we're ready for justice unadorned by mercy to show up and cleanse the earth. That's one reason we should perhaps seek, with intention, to grow more comfortable with forgiveness, even when it "isn't deserved."

Now there is another element with which we struggle when it comes specifically to God's forgiveness. There is something uncomfortable, isn't there, about the idea that God would go and write off someone's sins when those sins aren't just against God? If someone punches you in the face, you can forgive that person, certainly, but how would you feel if /just told that person he was forgiven, and you had no say in it? Maybe you weren't ready to forgive. Shouldn't it be up to you, at least a little? Who is anybody to declare null a debt that is owed to someone else? This is a thorny matter, really, and I don't think most of the time the church deals with it sufficiently.

² The story of the Israelites' struggle under the rule of Egypt and of their escape from enslavement is told in Exodus chapters 1 - 15. Moses and Miriam raise up songs of praise for God overturning unjust rule in chapter 15.

³ Upon being greeted by her cousin Elizabeth and hearing an exclamation of blessedness for the Lord's will being fulfilled in the child Mary is bearing, Mary raises up words of praise in Luke 1:46-55, in which she rejoices for God bringing up the lowly and bringing down the mighty.

So we have a hard time with forgiveness on a few fronts. We more or less prefer to think people should get what they deserve, and forgiveness erases that. Still, we know we probably need a lot of that erased. And yet the idea of God erasing it offends the notion that the wronged party should have a voice. Where do we turn? Let's go to our passage from Matthew.

Jesus, in Matthew 18, is working with what happens when wrong is done among people. It is an interesting sequence of events described here, and it is very personal. Let us walk through it. "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one."⁴ This right away introduces a line of thinking that says when wrong is done, maybe the only answer is not the offender "getting what he or she deserves." Maybe there is another option available: restoration. We don't open by publicly shaming someone, even if they've legitimately done wrong. This first step also accounts for the fact that sometimes when we think someone has wronged us, we are mistaken or in the wrong ourselves, and a one-on-one conversation with a little humility can let either party admit to that without being put in the wrong before a whole group.

"But if you are not listened to," it continues, "take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses."⁵ Here again: keeping it small and private as possible, but allowing the wisdom of third party observers to speak into the situation. And thus again, the deepest goal here is clearly not punishment but healing of the relationship.

"If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church,"⁶ we hear next. Sometimes things are so broken and wrong that it requires a full judgment of the whole family. And yet again, the hope is not placed in retribution but in that that judgment will be "listened to."

If not, though, "if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."⁷ This is certainly a recognition that relationship and communal membership in the same body can be broken apart. I'd caution us on exactly how we read that, though, because we should probably recall how it was that Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors.⁸ It was quite in contrast to how others treated them, and involved neither hatred nor rejection. So this is not, I think, a suggestion to shun and hate; it is a suggestion that even though we sadly may have to recognize someone's inability to see or accept what has occurred between them and us, and we may have to break from them in a certain sense, there is *still*, after all this, a genuine care and a hope of regaining that person into community.

Punishment would be a lot easier, frankly. This teaching from Jesus is all pointing us at reconciliation instead, which is built upon that thing that is so hard, forgiveness. So far as we've read this passage as about forgiveness between people. But then the really big line: "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."⁹ I don't know if it is possible to overstate the apparent magnitude of this pronouncement.

⁴ Matthew 18:15 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

⁵ Matthew 18:16 (*NRSV*).

⁶ Matthew 18:17a (*NRSV*).

⁷ Matthew 18:17b (*NRSV*).

⁸ See, for instance, Matthew 8:5-13, Matthew 9:9, Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 2:13-17, and Luke 19:1-10.

⁹ Matthew 18:18 (*NRSV*).

First, it undermines our objection to God disregarding persons who have been victimized in favor of pardoning the offenders who have done it. (That does not sound, anyway, like the same God who spoke to Moses of having heard and been stirred to action by the cries of the oppressed, enslaved Israelites.) Rather, here in this talk of binding and loosing there is the implication that God honors the victims of sin in a thorough way, by handing them a tool that reaches all the way into heaven. If our every act of forgiveness does not sit here as one small thing on earth, but is amplified and named as Reality by our Lord, resounding through all of Creation and carried to its fullness by God, setting aside the debt that might have been enforced on our behalf—then forgiving someone is a supremely weighty act, with enormous import.

Perhaps you've been forgiven of something truly substantial sometime in your life, and you already know that to be true anyway. This is bigger than what we can see right in front of us. We are taking part, in our every interaction with one another, in a story that reaches from here to heaven. Let us pray that we would find the means to bless one another with the infinitely tall order of responsibility that comes with the power to forgive, and let us give God glory with it, and lift to God our thanks for God's own mercy shown us first. Amen.