

Walking Together to the Promised Land

Exodus 14:19-31 Matthew 18:21-35

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If you've ever seen Cecil B. DeMille's portrayal of the parting of the Red Sea in his epic film, *The Ten Commandments*, it's hard to get the image out of your mind. The scene follows Moses, played by Charlton Heston, as he raises his shepherd's staff, and in his booming voice he calls out to God... Then in Hollywood magic, the seas part leaving a passageway wide enough for the thousands of people fleeing from Pharaoh's Egypt to walk through with their families, their carts and livestock and all of their belongings. And then, once on the other side, Moses raises his mighty staff again and the waters crash down upon Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit, drowning them and assuring safety for the Hebrew people.

Historically, it most likely did not happen exactly this way, but there are records that show that over a million Israelites escaped Egypt and went on a 3 month journey through the wilderness to Sinai, where God gave the Law (the Ten Commandments) to Moses. As I mentioned last week, that Law was written to serve the life and health of the community. The concern is not some private welfare. As one scholar writes: The first commandment (You shall love the Lord your God with all of your mind, body and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself) lays a claim: How you think about God will deeply affect how you think about and act toward your neighbor.

Theologically, the story serves the purpose of proving, once again, that God heard the cries of God's suffering people and did something about it. God lead them out of bondage to a land flowing with milk and honey-- A land of promise given to people who were in covenant relationship with the God of creation. A whole new world was opening up to them.

They have escaped a torturous lifestyle, and there they are. Still the same people who now are faced with all of the possibilities in front of them. What will they do with their newfound freedom?

It's always interesting to try and understand why the lectionary creators put various texts together. This morning's texts tell us a great deal about community life, how God uses communities to help us discern God's will and the sacred aspect of our life together.

The first point, we've already started talking about.

If you've ever tried to make a big change in your life (say losing weight, or giving up an addiction), you know it can be extremely difficult. Self-help groups can be a help. Besides the support of fellow journeyers, the idea is to assist people in changing their inner attitudes and

beliefs so that the changes they want to make will stick. Habits run deep, and it's hard to change behaviors if a person still struggles with the same reasons they started the habit in the first place.

I wonder if that may have been the reality for the Hebrew people who now found themselves in utter freedom for the first time in many of their lives. When you have been treated as a slave for decades, as they had, you might begin to think you deserve such treatment on a deep level. Worthiness may be a difficult reality to embrace.

There's a wonderful story that makes this case. I used it two and a half years ago, but it kept coming to me while I preparing this week's sermon. It's worth hearing again. I hear it's a true story...and it's profound even as far as animal stories go. It's about a polar bear which was given to the Denver Zoo by the people of Canada. The people at the zoo worked very hard to have the perfect habitat ready for their new prized animal. They planned a beautiful, large area with lakes full of fish, ice structures, and trees. The design provided plenty of area for the bear to grow and live a happy life. They got the bear when he was two months old and made sure that he would be OK in his crate for two more months while everything was being finished. The Canadians said that the polar bear would be fine for two additional months, but no longer than that. But as things would have it in the realm of bureaucracy, the habitat took two YEARS to finish instead of the projected two months. During that time the bear grew to be big and tall. He would pace back and forth in his crate...walking 4 steps this way, slowly turning with all of his weight behind him and slowly pace four steps that way.

Finally and thankfully, the habitat was finished. The zookeepers were anxious to set the bear free to live and play in his beautiful new home. They lifted the crate up and placed it within the new habitat. Then they let down the walls, waiting for him to run and play. And what do you think happened? When the walls were lowered, the bear continued to walk the same four paces that he had for his entire life. In fact, to even get him to another area of the grounds, they had to tranquilize him and move him themselves.

The Hebrew people had just come out of a period of brutal slavery. Some had been born into it, while others had a faint glimmer of what freedom felt like. It would be human nature, once freed to not know what to do with that freedom. It takes a while to exercise new muscles when the world of promise is open in front of you. They knew boundaries, albeit brutal boundaries. They knew how to live within the confines of restriction. But what about promise, faith, and freedom? What about living with joy instead of suffering? That would take time.

Second aspect of community we learn about from these texts comes from our Gospel passage. The parable Jesus tells lays out a moral framework for them to consider. What is right and what is wrong? Where does the inner compass of conscience which helps us make moral decisions come from? A recent article in the Christian Century by Peter Marty sheds some light. *The word conscience, from the Latin conscientia, is formed of two words, meaning "knowing together."* *That's a clue that it's best to think of conscience not as an inner voice but as the ability to think*

and act with outside help. Parents, teachers, and coaches all contribute to the shape of our conscience. So do formative events. So does God. God in Christ Jesus helps form followers into particular kinds of human beings.

What a plug for weekly worship! Here, as we read the scriptures together and hear the Word spoken, we get a recalibration of our moral compass. Perhaps that's aided by further conversations from others present to help us live as people of faith in a secular world. Fellow believers and the Holy Spirit help repair damaged consciences by a renewing of the hearts and minds in Christ.

Marty continues: *Jeremy Sabella in his article "Realism without despair" notes how Reinhold Niebuhr viewed the awakening of conscience as critical to mending a broken world. That Niebuhrian trumpet blast seems as urgent as ever, lest we become haunted people wearing our own thousand-yard stares. Forget about the cowardice, expediency, and vanity that ripple through too many corridors of {society} these seasons. It's time to start renewing our own conscience by asking the right questions. As Martin Luther King Jr. famously put it: "Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right?"*

Christian community helps us determine that answer according to the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ.

My last point about community this morning speaks to the necessity for forgiveness in community life. Let's first take a look back to the escaping Hebrew people, God's people. You can only imagine: they were hot, they were scared, they were unsure about their future. Babies were crying, the smells must have been horrendous, and who can imagine what slogging through all that mud on the sea floor must have been like? You can bet, people were getting on each other's nerves and needed to be forgiving, if that was even possible.

Now let's flip to the interaction with Jesus and Peter to zoom in on how just how difficult it is to give forgiveness, even when someone has received it in lavish amounts. A talent was about 130 lbs. of silver and would take a laborer about fifteen years to earn. Which means that the servant owed the king about 150,000 years of labor! In other words, he would never, ever be able to pay this debt back. A denarius, by comparison, was worth about a day's wage, which meant that the second servant owed the first about a hundred days of labor – no small debt. But still...and everyone who hears this parable gets it...how could he possibly not overlook that (relatively) minor debt when he had just been forgiven an impossibly huge one? The parable closes ominously, as the unforgiving servant is handed over for punishment until he pays and Jesus warns that we, too, must forgive others or face the consequences.

The failure of the first servant isn't simply that he won't forgive his comrade, but that he has just experienced an utterly unexpected, completely beyond-his-wildest-dreams, life-changing moment of grace and seems absolutely untouched by it. And for this reason, he lives devoid of any sense of gratitude. His whole life changed...and he didn't even notice.

Fast forward to our presence right here, right now. What can we glean for our lives together? It's difficult, maybe even impossible to grant complete forgiveness to someone, unless you have known it, REALLY known it in your own life.

In the parable the king's forgiveness is, of course, a reference to the unbelievable, nearly inconceivable, amazing and unpredictable and possibility-creating forgiveness of God which each of us has been granted...perhaps that is where we need to start. Unless you, unless I really know deep in our guts that we are completely and utterly forgiven for anything and everything we have ever done or will do...unless we have an understanding of that kind of love, we will keep bumping into each other and be offended at the slightest little things, all the time.

It's a game changer for individuals and for communities. All of the freedom to live and love and serve God is there for us. We're not called to a solo life. As Christians, we're called to a life in community. We are invited to join in the journey unencumbered; walk through the marsh and mud of life's painful situations, knowing that a bright future is not only ahead of us, but exists right here and NOW because God has called us into being and walks with us through both the hard times as well as those in the Promised Land.

We're at the beginning of a new year. We've got the world of ministry opened up to us, and God has so much in store for us this year and beyond, but we must discern that vision together.

On October 1, the leadership of this church will gather to do just that...to discern who we are as a community right now and where we need to go. The elders, the deacons and the committee chairs will dream and take time to discern where the Spirit is leading this place in this time. Are we ready for it? It won't always be easy. It may take hard work (discarding those patterns and beliefs which have encumbered us), but we are guided by God every step of the way. We need each and every person to join us on this journey together. and we will grow as a result of it.

I can't wait to see how we will respond to God's call to cross over into uncharted lands!

Amen!