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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY  
Pentecost 13/Proper 18/Year A/Exodus 12:1-14, Psalm 149, Romans 13:8-14,  
Matthew 18:15-20

“Freedom from Oppression?”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

Every year on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week we read today’s passage from the book of Exodus—that great foundational story of our Jewish ancestors and their final release from slavery at the hands of the Egyptians after more than 400 years of oppression. This story is brought to life each year as observant Jews commemorate and celebrate with a Passover seder. The seder dinner is a time of keeping memory alive and reaffirming that Yahweh, the God we know through our Judeo-Christian heritage, can be known most fully in the role of “liberator”—the one who frees the captives, who lifts up the oppressed, who cares for the weak, who combats despair. In the words of the seder ritual, “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.” And so, the Jewish people have kept this command.

The story of the Exodus has been an inspiration for all forms of liberation theology that have arisen over the past 200-plus years, beginning with the abolitionist movement. Slaves in the South found great courage in the Old Testament stories of the Exodus—a courage reflected in old hymns called “spirituals” like, “When Israel was in Egypt’s land, let my people go... Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land. Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.” Black liberation theologians proliferated in the twentieth century, inspiring black clergy, propelling the Civil Rights movement, and accomplishing radical change. But, sometimes, as the saying goes,

“the more things change, the more they stay the same.” And that saying especially holds true when it comes to racism in America—stubbornly lingering attitudes born of a history of treating a massive group of people as property rather than as human beings—racism that is so deeply embedded and so long-standing that we sometimes despair of even having the capacity to fully heal.

Prompted by the recent police shooting of a young black man in Ferguson, Missouri, Nicholas Kristof, writing in the New York Times about ten days ago, says that “Young black men in America suffer from widespread racism and stereotyping, by all society—including African-Americans themselves. Research in the last couple of decades suggests that the problem is not so much overt racists. Rather, the larger problem is a broad swath of people who consider themselves enlightened, who intellectually believe in racial equality, who deplore discrimination, yet who harbor unconscious attitudes that result in discriminatory policies and behavior.”

Kristof goes on to describe several scholarly studies that have been done in recent years that illustrate his point, including one in which thousands of resumes were sent out “in response to help-wanted ads, randomly alternating between stereotypically white-sounding names and black-sounding names. They found that it took 50 percent more mailings to get a callback for a black name” (New York Times, The Opinion Pages, 8/27/14). Reading of that study reminded me of a therapy client that I worked with a few years back who was in the mortgage lending business in its heyday. She had previously been married to an hispanic man and had taken his last name, but, on her own initiative, changed her name to one that “sounded” more “white” and discovered that her income increased far beyond her wildest imagination.

Obviously, the message of liberation is integral to our faith. Today's foundational story is referred to throughout our holy scriptures. The problem in today's Exodus reading arises when we get to the part where God strikes down the firstborn among the Egyptians—those in households without lamb's blood on the lintels and doorposts. We don't believe in a God who kills people at all, and certainly not innocent children of any race. Our reading from Exodus for next week--which is also read every Holy Week, at the Easter Vigil--is the story that comes a couple of chapters later in Exodus, the story of God's parting the Red Sea so that the Israelites might cross safely to freedom, and God's bringing the Red Sea back together as the Egyptians are attempting to follow. They are consequently drowned. We may remember the words of Miriam's song: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (EX 15:21).

In a reading from Jewish midrash on this story, a rabbinic author writes, "The Children of Israel are saved at the last moment, while their oppressors drown before their eyes. It is a moment of grace so extraordinary that the angels themselves begin to sing, but God interrupts and scolds them: What has come over you? My creatures are drowning in the sea and you are singing? How can you praise me with your hymns at a time when human beings are dying?" (quoted by Elie Wiesel in Passover Haggadah) God would, similarly, not be so pleased with taking the rap for the death of all the firstborn babies of the Egyptians. God simply doesn't do that sort of thing.

Turning to our gospel reading from Matthew, we face at least two problems. Jesus is talking with his followers about how to live in community. How to deal with differences in community has always been a major issue and has resulted in church splits too numerous to

count over the centuries—and even more instances of people being permanently alienated from any church. Jesus’ demands are difficult. We would rather do almost anything than to compassionately go to someone we believe has “done us wrong,” in an attempt—not to “get even” or to punish, but to reconcile and restore community. Going through the whole process that Jesus describes is advice that is rarely taken. More often we simply maliciously gossip about people behind their backs and occasionally hold grudges for a long time—hurting ourselves and hurting our community.

Then comes the second problem. Unfortunately, the piece of advice that is taken is the piece that has been misunderstood and misused—“if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Jesus’ message about listening and accountability gets turned into a message of power and control and even a message of oppression. This is one of the verses used to justify the practice of “shunning” by certain religious groups. Shunning is a type of oppression, of making someone else an outcast.

Shunning is a painful and sometimes dangerous practice. It is a form of bullying practiced among children and teens and even adults. The tragic results that can arise from shunning and bullying and social ostracism make front-page news far too often. We never hear of mass shootings being perpetrated by someone who is integrated into a loving community.

(Pause) We simply cannot afford the cost of making anyone an outcast—we simply cannot afford to practice social rejection.

The practice of shunning is a skewed interpretation of Jesus’ message in today’s gospel. Some scholars think that this passage was amended by later editors who apparently conveniently forgot that Jesus himself never excluded the “Gentiles and tax collectors,” but rather embraced

those who were the least acceptable in the eyes of traditional society or the religious establishment.

Paul carries Jesus' message a step further. He reminds the Romans of an important part of the ancient Jewish summary of the Law—"Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus wasn't talking about the person who lives next door. The Gentiles and the tax collectors are our neighbors. The ones who are most socially unacceptable are our neighbors. Illegal immigrants are our neighbors, no matter what our political viewpoint. The ones who don't agree with us or share our values are our neighbors. Paul reminds us that loving our neighbors is God's command. We don't love them because it is a nice thing to do. We do it because it is a command—the fulfillment of God's laws. Paul suggests that it is actually a debt that we owe to God—"Owe no one anything, except to love one another." We are indebted to love—love as a verb—living love in the world.

We've all had at least a small taste of oppression—of being the oppressor and of being the oppressed. Maybe the experience of harassment on the job, or even at home—maybe the experience of being excluded in some significant way--maybe the experience of victimization or marginalization—maybe the experience of racism or sexism or homophobia infecting our own hearts and minds. We cannot overcome the effects of these experiences or these attitudes on our own. Paul tells us an amazing thing—to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Think about it. The very idea is mind-boggling. How are we to possibly let go of our self-centeredness enough to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ"—to live our lives from a new perspective—that we might be enabled to do things that are beyond our capacity—that we might be enabled to love—even and especially those whom we consider to be unloveable. The only way we can do it is to throw

ourselves on the mercy and grace of God—and that is what we are called to do—how we are called to live—surrendering ourselves to God over and over. Our Collect for today reminds us that our hope is not in what we can do but in what God can do in us. “Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy.” Amen.