

Liberating Love: Challenging Empire

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: Exodus 4-12, Matthew 18:15-20

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus gives his disciples a lesson in listening, for the healing of community:

“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. 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. 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. 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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

SCRIPTURE READING *adapted from* Exodus 4-12 We last saw Moses, the reluctant liberator, at the burning bush, where God commanded him to “Go, tell Pharaoh to let my people go.” Four times Moses tried to squirm out of the job; four times God reassured him. He would not go alone: The God who self-identified as “I AM WHO I WILL BE” would be with him, and so would his older brother, Aaron. The next few chapters are harrowing: Pharaoh and his court scoffed at Moses’ miracles; local magicians even replicated them. In chapter 5, we’re told the Israelites themselves ignored Moses, “because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.” They were too tired even to imagine freedom. Then Moses started with the plagues, each increasingly horrific: the river turned to blood, frogs overran the land, then there were swarming gnats, flies, a pestilence on cattle, boils, hail destroying crops and locusts devouring them, and finally, three solid days of darkness. Each time Moses warned Pharaoh and Pharaoh refused to listen; each time the Egyptians were struck and the Israelites spared. After the first few events, Pharaoh started to relent, but changed his mind as soon as Moses lifted the plague. Even Pharaoh’s advisors began begging the boss, get these troublemakers out of Dodge. Maybe the Israelites themselves got a little gumption when they saw that the plagues went right around them. After all, Pharaoh was a god to the Egyptians, the god who enslaved Hebrews and others. This was not a stealthy escape plan, it was a battle of the gods, down to the tenth and last brutal plague: the death of the firstborn. Here we pick up the story:

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: “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. Your lamb shall be without blemish, from the sheep or the goats.... The whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter them at twilight. 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. Eat it roasted whole, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Eat it with 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.

“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. 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. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you.... You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the Lord has promised to give you, and when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ you shall say, ‘It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.’”

Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, “Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord, as you said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!” The Egyptians urged the people to hasten their departure from the land, for they said, “We shall all be dead.” So the people took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading bowls wrapped up in their cloaks on their shoulders. The Israelites had done as Moses told them; they had asked the Egyptians for jewelry of silver and gold, and for clothing, and the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians who had plundered them for four hundred thirty years; on that very day, all the companies of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt, a mixed multitude of people.

Whoa. To those who would try to soften up the image of God in the Old Testament, good luck. How do we find meaning or comfort in this 3000-year-old story? How do we reconcile it with the God of love we’ve been taught to believe in? How does it square with the Gospel we just read, that lays out a plan for nonviolent communication, and a reasoned way of working out grievances? Or do we? Let’s live for a minute in the discomfort, and think about Moses’ task here. He had to challenge the superpower, the No. 1 Empire of the day, and engage its god, the Pharaoh, in spiritual warfare on behalf of a God whose name, “I AM,” no one had heard before. He had to rally his own people, beaten down by centuries of oppression, and persuade them it was this “I AM” God’s plan to give them their own land, of peace and plenty. He had to fix things with the Egyptians so they not only waved goodbye to the departing slaves but pressed their valuables on them. And then he had to get them all out of town in a hurry before Pharaoh changed his mind again, as he inevitably would.

That’s a tall order. Especially for one who described himself as “slow of speech,” possibly even with a speech impediment. And yet this story became the defining moment for the Israelites and for the Jewish nation they became, for Jesus himself and, though we often forget it, for us as Christians. When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, when we say the words, “In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread,” *that night* he was celebrating the passover commanded for all generations. Is it strange to think that our holiest act of worship, our most sacred expression of community, our most comforting reassurance of forgiveness harks back to this horrifying story?

And is it somehow disquieting, discomforting, to think that the freedom hopes of downtrodden people are built on this bloody non-battle? Here in our own country's history, enslaved people found their faith, hope, and courage here? This is where the God Yahweh, the great I AM WHO I AM FOR MY PEOPLE won life for the oppressed through the death of the oppressor, the downfall of the Empire. I find this story very uncomfortable; almost the stuff of nightmare.

Or it would be, except for a few little words, hidden in plain view, but easy to miss. First, Exodus 12:38 says that night, in their hurry, a "mixed multitude" left. Not just Israelites, it would seem, but others, too, who were *not* the glitterati, the bejeweled, upper class cronies of Pharaoh, but the broken-spirited, the other working stiffs who were also worn out by servitude to the Empire. Can it be that the same wild hope seized them that seized the Israelites, led them to kill a lamb, and paint their doors, and cast their lot with the losers who now suddenly seemed to have all the forces of nature on their side, not to mention this crazy new God? The new-found audacity of the Hebrew slaves somehow gave others an unexpected pathway into freedom. Gave them permission to believe liberation was more than a pipe dream; it was an attainable reality. The Empire was brought to its knees; but the people triumphed.

There's also the little repeated word in Matthew, that carries the great weight and promise of reconciliation: "Listen." "If that one listens to you," Jesus says. If the offender listens to two or three, if she listens to the church, then you have regained that one, you have made a friend of someone who might have been an enemy. "Listening" here implies hearing someone out, taking their grievance seriously, responding in kind - something Pharaoh never did learn to do.

Just a little listening makes a world of difference: listening to your body, to tell you when you need rest, or food, or a doctor's care, can save you from a lot of hurt. Listening to scientists when they tell us what causes a disease, and what spreads it, and what it does to the vulnerable can save a loved one from untimely death. Listening to the earth when plagues of fire and hurricane and drought erupt might save our children's children from disasters more devastating than any we've seen yet. A little listening makes a world of difference.

Empire generally fails at listening. Maybe Empire is too comfortable to believe in the possibility of discomfort. I've told you I don't really follow sports, but I do know who Colin Kaepernick is. And so I was pleasantly surprised to read this week that NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, who helped banish Kaepernick three years ago, reversed his opinion. "We should have listened," he said. But, he said, "You really don't learn until you're uncomfortable."¹

What Empire does God call us to challenge today? Empire is "the convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic, and military imperial interests, systems, and networks for the purpose

¹ Cindy Boren, [Roger Goodell wishes the NFL 'had listened earlier' to Colin Kaepernick, supports players who kneel](#) Washington Post, 8/25/20

of amassing political power and economic wealth.”² There’s a mouthful! In lay terms, Empire is whatever stands in the way of God’s dream for the world - a dream of a flourishing human community that includes people of all colors and cultures, abilities and identities, living in harmony with one another, as allies of earth, each worshiping the Creator by the name they know and love best.

You might say Empire defined like this is the idol, the false god, of our times. It comes from no one person, though it is of human making. You are not Empire. I am not Empire. We are not allies of Empire when we dream God’s dream. Like Moses, we are God’s messengers when we challenge Empire and make friends with the “mixed multitude” of people who yearn to join God’s army of peacemakers en route to freedom. It may not always be a comfortable ride. These words of mine may offend you. If so, I hope you will speak. If you speak, I hope I can listen. Because gaining one another as friends means we are both liberated by love from the hard work of being enemies. And even if we ultimately fail to agree, we can remember Jesus’ words to “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” We can remember how Jesus dealt with “tax collectors and Gentile sinners”: He spoke with them, listened to them. He ate with them. He forgave them. He loved them. He took the place of the unblemished passover lamb and died for them, for us, and for all, so that we could be here together today and share this meal today, so that together we can take comfort in God’s liberating love. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

God of yesterday, today, and all our unknown tomorrows, how can we be sure we are on your side of history? You have shown us time and time again that you are on the side of struggling humanity, standing against the false gods of Empire. They rise and fall; your cross, your living Christ, your self-giving and forgiving love, tower over each idol. We thank you, Merciful One.

Our world stirs in consternation at fires and floods, plagues of locusts and pandemic illness. You are the still center, the beating heart of the universe. May we find in each upheaval small notes of hope leading us forward.

We call to mind and hold in your Light all those at risk: the sick and the caregivers, teachers and students, the careless and the careful, the lost, homeless, desperate; the lonely, the grieving. We remember especially those named already in our prayers, those we hold in the quiet of our hearts, and those dear to our congregation.

² I owe this definition to Rafael Vallejo, PhD, in his NEXTchurch blog, “Mission as Resistance and Struggle,” August 20, 2020. https://nextchurch.net/mission-as-resistance-and-struggle/?mc_cid=2cf351537e&mc_eid=61595cf307. The quote is from the Accra Confession of 2004.

Be with us now as we come together to celebrate the meal that is a foretaste of the feast to come, in paradise with you, in the name of Jesus. Amen