

Liberating Love: Remembering Mercy

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

15th Sunday after Pentecost - September 13, 2020

Texts: Exodus 13-15, Matthew 18:21-35

SCRIPTURE READING adapted from Exodus 13-15

Throughout the Exodus narrative, God is known by the name told to Moses when God called him to lead the Israelites out of slavery: “I AM,” or “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE,” often rendered as “THE LORD,” “Jehovah,” or “Yahweh.”

When Pharaoh let the people go, I AM led the people by way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And I AM went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.

Then I AM said to Moses: “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself, and the Egyptians shall know that I AM WHO I AM FOR MY PEOPLE.” When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, he said, “What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?” So he took all the chariots of Egypt and pursued the Israelites, and overtook them where they were camped by the sea.

In great fear the Israelites cried out to their God I AM. They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the great God I AM will work for you today. I AM WHO I AM will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and I AM drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued them, and went into the sea after them.” Then I AM said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians and their chariots.” So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, they were tossed into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea. Thus I AM saved Israel that day, and Israel saw the great work done for them. So the people feared the God I AM WHO I WILL BE FOR MY PEOPLE and believed in God’s servant Moses.

Then the prophet Miriam, Moses and Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing, and sang, “Sing to I AM, who has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider are thrown into the sea.”

Today's Gospel follows Jesus' words about seeking reconciliation; he also reminded them that "whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven; what you loose on earth is loosed in heaven." Appropriately, today he speaks of forgiveness

GOSPEL READING

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to Jesus, "Teacher, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents (or about \$1M) was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii (\$100-200); and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Sometimes I have a hard time forgiving God. Bad things happen. People we love die too young. Wildfires drive half a million people from their homes. Landslides obliterate villages in Nepal. A deadly virus sweeps around the world. 9/11 happened. And I get that God doesn't *inflict* these things on people as punishment. I may even be partly responsible for things like climate change. But if God is all-powerful, all-loving and all-forgiving, why? Why *let* these things happen?

We saw an old friend this week, a kind, generous, thoughtful woman. She struggles with the idea of a God who caused the flood, or killed Egyptian babies, as we heard last week, who drowned Pharaoh's army in the sea. She has chosen to be guided by the values of compassion and truth rather than believe in such a God. I honor her choice. And I love her, partly because she makes me wonder. Why do I persist in believing in this God? Praying to this God? Trusting this God?

And all I can come up with is that every now and then I get a tiny glimpse into the depth and breadth of God's mercy. God's love to me, love that's unearned, undeserved. God's forgiveness. Every now and then I am astonished by the goodness that simply flows to me every morning, like the air in my lungs and the water in my tap. Like life itself. I realize how much I take for granted. And then I think about how the world changed 19 years and two days ago. More was shattered on that day than the twin towers. Our sense of security was destroyed. Where was God?

Those of us of a certain age each have our 9/11 stories, don't we? I hope you don't mind if I share mine with you. I was pastor in a small congregation, not unlike CPC. I hadn't been there long, less than a year. As the news broke over us all that day, we decided to meet in the evening for prayer, for lament, for mutual support. People hugged and wept, shared their shock and horror, their disbelief, their anger. They comforted one another, and they looked to me for comfort, for understanding. How could God let this happen? And I made what I consider one of the biggest mistakes of my life as a pastor. I said, "We need to forgive the people who did this."

Those words, my words, wounded them even more. I was frustrated, and disappointed in them. They were hurt, and disappointed in me. Months later, a wise elder of the congregation said to me, privately, "You were right. But we weren't ready to hear it yet." I am in debt to those good people who forgave me for tearing their bleeding hearts farther open, and who chose to love me anyway. I spent four more years there; a lot of good things came of that partnership.

Nineteen years later, I think a lot of people still aren't ready to forgive. I can't judge them. To be honest, I'm not sure I had a clue, then or now, what forgiveness for that event even looks like. No one asked for forgiveness, after all, even us. Would forgiving insult, dishonor, or diminish the memory of the incredible heroes who died that day saving American lives? I don't believe so; you may disagree. I'm not sure I've forgiven our country for what followed: children not even born on 9/11 are fighting and dying in wars initiated by our desire for revenge. Nearly ten years after the event, spontaneous celebrations broke out in the US when Osama bin Laden was killed, spontaneous eruptions of joy that someone else was dead. Revenge tastes sweet, but it leaves a bitter aftertaste. Forgiveness is hard. But not forgiving locks us into prison as securely as any jailer. In Jesus' parable, a slave who was forgiven an impossible amount then refused to forgive a trifle. One who begged for and received mercy had no mercy on the one who begged from him. Jesus' story was not about money, it was about relationships. The first slave was released from his debt, but not from his obligation to love as he was loved. He locked himself into a prison and a torture of his own making when he failed in that obligation.

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." We pray this every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. Do we know what it means? This, too, is not about money or about boundary violations, trespasses. It doesn't mean that God *won't* forgive us *unless* we forgive others. It doesn't mean excusing, or forgetting evil. It doesn't mean eliminating consequences, or not holding people accountable. I believe it means starting over and rebuilding relationships, and entering into a mutual obligation to love. It means remembering mercy in order to show mercy. And I know I can't do that without the help of God. I'm too damned human. Until God undamns me. Forgives me. Loves me into a place where I can love those who have harmed me or those I love. That's why I have to keep believing, praying, trusting. I can't remember mercy without God's help.

So what of the God who slew the first-born of the Egyptians, who drowned their army? Is this the same God that Jesus showed us? Look at it this way: the Israelites were newborn into freedom after centuries of oppression. They still weren't sure of God's presence with them, in spite of the pillar of

cloud and fire leading and protecting them. God had to teach them to trust. God had to teach them to remember mercy. To ask them *not* to celebrate God's victory in that moment would have been absurd and cruel, just as it's absurd and cruel to expect the people who have been oppressed to be the first to forgive, and show tolerance. But centuries later a Jewish rabbi retold the story from Exodus this way: 'When God triumphed over the Egyptian army, the angels danced and sang with the women on the shores of the sea. But one angel saw that God stood apart and wept. "Why do you weep?" she asked. "Haven't you won a great victory for your children?" "Ah," God answered, "But the Egyptians are my children, too."' For this story, I can forgive God a lot.

God has not changed. It's we who need to change. As our hearts grow bigger, our idea of God grows bigger too. As we remember God's mercy to us, we remember to be merciful to others. As we begin to comprehend the meaning of Jesus' life and death, we begin to comprehend the suffering of others, and even our own.¹ As Abraham Lincoln said, "Do I not destroy my enemy when I make him my friend?" Yes. What I have learned is that God imprisons no one, punishes no one, excludes no one. We do that to others, we do it to ourselves. GOD WILL BE WHO GOD WILL BE FOR ALL GOD'S PEOPLE. What God longs for us to do is to throw off our burdens of resentment and the crippling weight of unexamined privilege and set love loose in the world. It doesn't happen overnight; but it will never happen unless we begin. So let us begin right now to remember mercy, to liberate love from the places where it's bound up in fear and distrust. What do we have to lose but enemies? What do we have to gain but friends? So right now - lay down your sword and shield, lay down your burden, and study war no more. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers: God, you have proved time and again that *you are for us*, you are on our side, you fight for us when we cannot fight for ourselves - and you also fight for those we have discounted, ignored, and judged unfairly as inferior to ourselves and unworthy of your love. Teach us to remember mercy; help us to liberate ourselves from the bondage of our own sense of privilege.

**We feel stunned and helpless in the face of disasters pummeling the earth, too many to name, too many to pray for in this moment, but not too many for your mercy to embrace. Teach us where and when and how to take responsibility for our actions, and to rebuild our relationships, not just with those different from ourselves but with creation itself. Make us instruments of your peace.

**Thank you for the gift of music - of celebration in sound, in dancing, and singing, for joy that transcends sorrow and hope that transcends pain; we thank you for the life in our bodies this day.

¹ I owe this insight to Richard Rohr's online Daily Devotions (9/7/20). One thing I have learned is that for too long we've asked people who are not white, right and tight with us to be the first to forgive: people of color, indigenous, immigrants, women, queer or transgender people. They've had to hide themselves, humble themselves, explain themselves, prove themselves again and again. They've had to battle with society and even with themselves to claim their place as God's children. But we privileged people who expect this of them suffer from a failure of mercy; we condemn ourselves even as we victimize others.