

Liberating Love: Changing Directions

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: Exodus 32:1-14 (adapted), Philippians 4:4-9,

Matthew 22:1-14

Exodus 32:1-14, 33 (adapted) *While Moses remained on the mountain, receiving the Words of love--laws for healing their relationship to God and one another--the people grew restless. Forgetting God and Moses, they begged Moses' brother Aaron to make them new gods to follow. He took their jewelry and made the image of a golden calf. And the people sacrificed to this image, and celebrated.*

Then I AM said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

But Moses implored the Lord, and said, "Why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And God changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Philippians 4:4-9 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Matthew 22:1-14 *Jesus has been drawing the anger of the authorities, who are already plotting to kill him. And so he speaks more and more clearly of God's welcome to the least, and God's judgment on those who pride themselves on their own righteousness and receive God's generosity with indifference.* Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and

everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Some weeks, the Bible is too much for me. I don’t know what to do with it. The picture it paints of God is too complicated. From Matthew: Is God a generous host, welcoming all, or a harsh, vindictive judge, condemning a guest to eternal torment for lack of party clothes? From Exodus: Is God committed forever to Israel, or ready to wipe them out for making a golden calf? Is God changeless, or can God really change directions? Or all of the above? This week, my heart sidestepped the God problem, and returned to a friend named Luella and what she taught me.

Nothing is so bonding as watching through the night with someone during a crisis. That’s how Luella and I became friends. I was new to the community of Cabrini Green where I was assigned as intern pastor, but I was learning fast. You have to understand that the housing project called Cabrini was built on the site of an older slum, an Italian ghetto called “Hell’s Kitchen,” for good reason. Sometime in the 50s, the authorities dug a big hole in the ground and bulldozed all that squalor right into the hole. They covered it over with concrete and built high-rise apartments on top. But what began as a well-planned community devolved into an opportunity desert, lacking any reasonable services like safe schools, health care, or affordable food stores. A few churches remained as beacons of hope and help. Among them was my church, Holy Family.

If there was desolation above ground, there was also disruption below: the buried wreckage of Hell’s Kitchen shifted and a water main burst, flooding the streets and the church basement. Official help, as usual, took days to arrive. Luella appointed herself to watch through the night to make sure the church wasn’t looted in the chaos, and to sound an alarm if the water kept rising. I watched with her. And we talked through the night.

Luella’s parents were part of the Great Migration of Blacks who fled the Jim Crow laws of the South between 1915 and 1970 to start a new life in northern cities where they could actually vote, sit where they liked on the bus, and escape a sharecroppers’ life that was little better than slavery. Like pre-Civil War slaves, they frequently had to slip away in secret, leaving everything behind. Also like the slaves, they placed their trust in the God of the Exodus, who led the Israelites out of bondage and into the Promised Land. The North became that land of promise.¹

¹ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*, 2010.

Many migrants from South to North, like Michelle Obama's family, made stable homes and families, through hard work, persistence, and maybe some good luck; but others ended up in places like Cabrini, literally abandoned by society. Luella had five sons, four of them grown but living nearby (they had nowhere else to go), and one teenage daughter, LaQuanda. All four older sons had been sucked into the gang system that dominated Cabrini; all had been shot in gang violence, but all had somehow survived. Luella was understandably protective of her only daughter and her youngest son, who was small and shy, and ripe for gang recruitment. She received welfare payments for the underage children, but often ended up supporting older ones as well.

Almost a year after the flood, Luella's daughter LaQuanda went out one evening to buy milk from the overpriced (in)convenience store just across the street. Coming home, she was caught in gang crossfire and killed. Once again, I sat with Luella through the long night that followed. Friends and relatives came and sat and wept with her, mourning not just LaQuanda but the whole complicated mess: the never-ending struggle to get through each day, and the tangled legacy of racism that lay beneath the surface, like the shifting toxic waste of Hell's Kitchen. But lament is sometimes the doorway to hope, and hope did emerge from all this sadness.

Here is the miracle: Luella survived the death of her daughter. She took over the community room in her highrise and put her artistic talent on display, painting colorful cartoon characters on the walls. She made a place where the children of the building could come after school to do their homework in peace, with help from volunteers. She caught the attention of a non-profit that donated computers. Luella was interviewed in Ms. Magazine and appeared as a guest on the Oprah show. She died too young, though, of cardiac arrest, in the hospital where she was being treated for cancer. Her family maintained that staff had ignored her distress because of her race. I just don't know; it's not inconceivable.

During my time at Holy Family, Luella was always present when there was work to be done, or weekday Bible study. But, strangely, she rarely came to worship. It was a long time before I got up the courage to ask why. I was afraid she would say she didn't have money for the right clothes. Black women, especially, dress up for church. She avoided my eyes as she said, "I just look like a big black gorilla." She wasn't large, but her skin was dark, smooth and rich as French roast coffee, untainted by cream. She could change her dress, but she couldn't change the suit she was born in. She could guard her church all night long, but still feel unworthy of worshiping with God's other children--also Black, but lighter than she was. This is the legacy that 600 years of documented racist propaganda bequeathed to this gentle, beautiful soul.²

I come to God's banquet table assured of my welcome. I have to ask, is my assurance based on the color of my skin, or the easy privilege of being a small-town banker's daughter? Is it based on the outward symbols of prosperity that, like the Israelites' gold jewelry, are easily transformed into a

² Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, 2020; see Chapter 1, "The Story of the World's First Racist" (c. 1415.)

false god - a golden calf? No one is intrinsically better, closer to God, than anyone else. On the contrary, Jesus sought out the poorest, the most despised people, and lived among them. To the grand folk who wore the finest clothes and prayed loudly and publicly, he gave a warning: "The tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of you."

Yes, the Bible really does tell us how God changed his mind about destroying the Israelites who had so quickly abandoned the covenant that began with the words, "I AM the God who brought you out of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me." In fact, the Hebrew word says God *repented* of the intended calamity. Did God change direction? Or did love prove stronger than wrath? Or does repenting of anger and remembering mercy really come to the same thing?

One thing I know: if God can change direction, change her mind, so can I. But that means more than putting on a party dress or pouring fresh concrete over old toxic waste. It means digging down to the roots of the problem, down to Hell's Kitchen, down to the hidden history of racism and elitism that gives a leg up to people who look like me and a knee down on people who look like Luella. The legacy of Jesus is the opposite of a difference invented to keep us apart. It is the legacy of liberating love that brings us together. The love of Jesus begins with a change of heart, an inner change of direction that works its way through us till we are "clothed with a new self," clothed with Christ's goodness, remade in the image of our creator God (Col. 3:10 and Eph. 4:24). This is not just an individual blessing, but the righteousness of God working its way out into the world, making the land of promise real, not just in the hereafter, but in the here and now.

Luella taught me a lot about hope that survives sorrow. I hope she knows, in that eternal Promised Land, just how much. And I hope that someday, we will eat at God's welcome table together. "Now, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things - and the God of peace be with you." Amen.

God of welcome, how many times have you tried to soften our stiff necks and our hard hearts so we love you and one another as you intended? We want to be what you want us to be. Help us to change from the inside out.

God of wind and weather, bring help and healing to places battered by storms this fall, especially those in Louisiana; and places ravaged by fire, and to all the people who live there.

God of peace, as we approach election day and tensions mount, let calmer reason prevail over desperate grasping after gains or power.

God of justice, be with our law enforcement officers; protect them and protect the communities they serve from needless violence.

God of tender care, be with all those afflicted with the coronavirus, all who care for them, all who are in danger of contracting it, especially teachers, students and frontline workers.

We pray now as Jesus taught his disciples, and still teaches today, "Our Father, who art...."