

September 6, 2020 14th Sunday after Pentecost Sermon notes

Exodus 12:1-14, Psalm 149, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

Every family has stories that describe and influence the character of that family. They might be stories of the recovery from a disaster or they might be stories of very good fortune. Whatever the story it shapes and describes the character of the family as it is told and re-told. In my family they were stories of struggles and triumphs in the face of financial obstacles which is part of the reason why I formed the habits of re-using and re-purposing things long before the ad campaign of “reduce, reuse, recycle” was invented. In our family gatherings we tell and re-tell the stories of how we managed when my father lost his job and had to work at various odd jobs just to make ends meet. Stories of how my mother could stretch a dollar by repairing our old clothes and knitting our new clothing - sometimes out of reclaimed wool. These are the stories of my clan and they mean little to anyone else but are foundational to the character of the descendants of Wendell and Jean Miller. National stories have a similar effect and touch a much wider audience - how we coped with the Covid-19 pandemic will become part of our national story. In the world of God’s family the story of the Passover is tremendously significant and it functions to describe and influence the character of the adopted members of the family of God as well as those who are physical descendants of Abraham. It is the story of a rescue project organized and conducted by the God who made a covenant with the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. The amazing release from bondage into freedom and the journey of the released captives toward their land of promise is at the core of our own story of rescue at the hand of God’s Messiah, Jesus, and our journey to our promised land. As we encounter this ‘old, old, story’ once again I hope that we are able to hear how that story can continue to influence our lives today. The Passover can bring new meaning to all that we hear during today’s worship event so I invite you to open your hearts and minds to what God’s Spirit is saying to us, the Church.

Spring had arrived in Egypt and Moses had been pleading with Pharaoh to allow the descendants of Abraham to travel to the mountain where Moses saw the burning bush. His requests had been repeatedly refused by the ruling Pharaoh. In a battle that demonstrated God’s supremacy over all the false gods and goddesses the land of Egypt was afflicted with 9 plagues but Pharaoh continued to say no to the request. In the last of the 10 plagues God was to demonstrate his power in a devastating way. The first born of humans and animals would die at God’s hand in a frightening sign of God’s sovereignty. The descendants of Abraham were instructed to signal their identification with God’s covenant by participating in a Passover meal and marking the entrance to their dwelling with the blood of the lamb in token of their membership in the covenant. Under this sign of their commitment to God’s covenant they would be protected from the devastation of the killing of the first born and delivered from their bondage. With this final plague Pharaoh finally relented and allowed the people to depart. Superstition caused the

Egyptians to give much treasure to the departing Israelites and so they left the land in which generations of Israelites had lived in order to return to the land which God had promised to the ancestors of Abraham and Sarah. A perpetual memorial was established and this story was retold in word and action from that day until our present day in the households that descended from that great family. It was (and is) a story that reminded them that they were a rescued people in a covenant relationship with the Creator of the world - the story that reminded them they were a chosen race, a royal priesthood, God's own people. Their journey through the wilderness was going to demonstrate God's commitment to them and his power to protect them in wonderful ways. They were to become a transformed people. Transformed from slave to conqueror, from defeated to rulers, from oppressed to over-comers. Such is the power of God to heal, to strengthen, and to send. They were on their way, from the Passover ceremony, to be God's representatives to the rest of Creation and all those who have been born into or adopted into this family are part of that wondrous project. This and much more is what the story of that first Passover communicates to those who are part of this family. This distinctive household, marked by God, were to be the way in which all of Creation would be able to see their Creator at work in the world.

It was not by accident that God chose this central story to frame the events of the crucifixion of his Anointed One. It was during the celebrations surrounding the Passover meal that Jesus was arrested, falsely accused, tried and convicted in what was seen as a misuse of the authority given to the decision makers and then he was killed by crucifixion. The first begotten of God was sacrificed in order to rescue the human race and make it possible for everyone to participate in the project of God. The power of Rome appeared to have succeeded in eliminating a competitor for the throne of the world but God demonstrated His supremacy by raising Jesus as the first fruit of that ultimate resurrection destined to occur in the last day. "Not by might or power but by the Spirit of God" was the work of God to continue onward through the descendants of Abraham and those adopted into the family. A truly wonderful story that forms the central identity of all who call themselves Christians.

Today, after a long absence, we gather at this common table to celebrate a Christian version of the Passover celebration. Here we remember who we are through story and action and are once again invited to accompany our God on the journey in order to be the transformed people. We have not been in bondage to a cruel tyrant but we have been kept from all that has made our lives meaningful. This day is the first of many days in which we pray God will show us His power to heal, to strengthen, and to send messengers into His world. This calling that has been placed upon us comes with certain expectations. Some of those have been spelled out in today's Gospel reading while other appear in the letter from St. Paul to the Romans. If we are truly a transformed people it will not do for us to behave the way we did before God took us by the hand. Our interactions with one another, for instance, are meant to describe in action what has been changed in our hearts. So if someone in the fellowship of

believers does something that offends you, Jesus says, go to that person and speak privately with them in order to maintain the bond of peace. Notice the word 'privately' which flies in the face of today's society where private conversations are conducted on Facebook and Twitter and other social media platforms. If the offense is between two people the resolution needs to stay between two people for as long as possible. I find it interesting in this passage from Matthew's Gospel that the instruction seems to suggest one visit with the person who has caused the offense because in my experience this sometimes requires more than one visit. We are asked to do all we can to be reconciled before involving other people. It is in this context Jesus speaks about two or three gathered in his name making requests. We cannot be 'gathered together in Jesus' name' if there is something preventing our complete union. How can we 'agree on earth about anything' when there is an obstacle between us. The transformation of the people of God involves so much more than personal redemption, as important as that may be. The transformation of the people of God also affects the way in which the family gathers, decides, and worships their Creator. The central story of the Eucharist during which we give thanks for the tremendous gift of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection forms the basis for this unity of life and calls us to the extraordinary challenge of walking in God's way as we travel in this world.

Every family has a story that describes and influences the character of the family. The story of the Eucharist is an important part of our story and I rejoice at the opportunity to celebrate that story with you as we begin to re-gather after our Eucharistic fast. May God use this time to continue to transform us into the Body of Christ serving each other and the communities in which we live. May God bless you all as you consider these challenges.