

Freedom, Conflict, and Presence

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-20

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Do Justice. Love Kindness. Walk humbly with God. As we are making our way through these challenging days – days of the pandemic, days of hostility and violence, days when many of us are becoming newly aware of the long and ongoing realities of racial injustice in our society, days when we are surrounded by seemingly endless polarization – we are given these two texts, that Linda just read for us. A text from Exodus 12 about the great freedom meal of Passover and a gospel text from Matthew about conflict resolution. The lectionary has an uncanny way of bringing words that we need to hear – it may not happen all the time, but more times than one might expect. In our moment, we may hear these texts teaching us that the great kingdom work of building the beloved community is the work of liberating all who are oppressed *and* the work of engaging in persistent, nonviolent, loving confrontation. Liberation of all who are oppressed and nonviolent, loving confrontation.

The Passover meal, described in detail in Exodus 12, is the meal of freedom for those who were slaves and now are free, those who were oppressed by an empire and who have been liberated. The meal is described in chapter 12, the liberation is accomplished in chapter 14, and is to be celebrated for all time. The exodus from slavery is central to the identity of Israel and of Israel's God. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery," is how the Giver of the 10 Commandments self-identifies. The Lord heard the cries of the Hebrew slaves, because *that's what God does*; the text teaches us that God is attentive to the cries of oppressed people, wherever they occur. And God acts in history to liberate them from their bondage. It is from this paradigmatic story of liberation that we get the energy and the power of liberation theology – articulated for a variety of contexts, and summed up by Gustavo Gutierrez, one of the founders of Latin American liberation theology, who said that "all you really need to know about Christianity is that it stands always on the side of life over against death."¹

The Passover meal of freedom and liberation is, of course, the meal that Jesus ate with his followers that became our celebration of the Lord's Supper. Every time we gather at the communion table, we consciously place ourselves in this great stream of freedom, locating ourselves with the Hebrew slaves and with slaves in every society throughout history, including slaves in our own land. We take our place with them, in the knowledge that God hears the cries of oppressed people and is at work for their

¹ As quoted in Robert Shelton, "Theology and Willie Nelson," [ATLA Summary of Proceedings](#), 46 1992, p 197-200.

liberation and flourishing. The beloved community is a community of justice, a community where the marginalized and oppressed know that they belong at the table, and where those in the dominant culture – which means those of us who are white – are learning to live lives of glad solidarity rather than anxious accumulation, lives of generosity rather than defensiveness and fear.

Building the beloved community is the work of liberating those who are oppressed.

And that is not all! We are also given this text from Matthew 18 about conflict resolution. The Bible knows that in the work of building the beloved community, sins will be committed, resistance and hostility are going to be encountered. 'If another member of the church sins against you,' the text begins. When your fellow congregant, when your neighbor sins against you, offends you, trespasses against you, hurts you ... you do not have license to post about them on social media, you are not free to tweet about them, you are not to go and gossip with your friends about what a horrible person they are. No, when your fellow congregant sins against you, you are to go to them, face to face, and talk about it when the two of you are alone. If that does not work, you are still not free to post about it on social media or gossip about it with your friends. You are to bring along someone else, maybe someone who is a bit more objective about the situation and who may be able to help you all work it out. And if that doesn't work, you're still not free to declare the person a horrible human being, it is a breakdown in the fabric of the church, which means that it is a concern for the whole body. And if that fails to restore the relationship, then the person shall be as a Gentile or a tax collector to you. Now we might think that means that you finally get to treat them as a monster, but then we remember that disciples of Jesus are sent to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, and to sit at table with tax collectors. So even then, your relationship with them is to continue.

In our society of alienation and violence and hostility, it can be hard to imagine Matthew 18 being put into practice with anything like spiritual grace and maturity. Not as a self-righteous way to shame or attack those who we think are in the wrong, but having the depth of love and groundedness in our own relationships with Christ to go face to face with those who, in our eyes, have acted wrongly. Now, we may notice that the text speaks here of situations involving another member of the church, so we may think that lets us off the hook of needing to engage with those outside the church. But then we remember that any time the disciples tried to draw lines to circumscribe the ones they were supposed to love, Jesus tended to move right past those lines.

Matthew 18 teaches us to build the beloved community by loving, nonviolent confrontation with those from whom we are divided. The beloved community cannot be built with violence. As we see what is unfolding in Kenosha, Portland, Rochester, in the streets of cities and small towns, wherever we encounter the spirit of violence, whether it is in the lives of others or in our own hearts, whether it is from those on the political

right or those on the political left, wherever we find ourselves permissive towards violence as long as it being done by those we agree with, *whenever* we encounter the spirit of violence, we need to recognize that we are in the presence of an idolatrous spirit that is impatient and fearful and unwilling to stay with the power of courageous love. The beloved community cannot be built upon fear and hatred and violence, but only with courageous, conscious love.

Peter Marty, the publisher of *The Christian Century* and the son of the renowned church historian Martin Marty, has written recently about the work of dismantling structural racism, addressing those of us who can get defensive about this stuff. He says to his white friends and colleagues: "Look, you have some tools in the toolbox of your faith life that are exciting to put to work in our world of racial inequity. Start by letting go of the defensiveness. That's a must. It's a constrictive survival response that only separates you from God. I know we equate letting go of something, including cherished assumptions, with deprivation. But claw marks don't set you free. According to Jesus, *relinquishment is a ticket to abundant life*. Reexamining personal behaviors and perspectives isn't just a Lenten project. We no longer have the luxury of living racially unaware lives. Where you feel uncomfortable, disempower it. Let go of your brittleness. The Lord helps us know that we don't have to secure ourselves against insecurity. Relax into the power of faith. Do some soul searching.... And live with the mind of Christ, humbly open to changing all that needs to be changed about you and your world."²

Friends of Jesus Christ, we are on our way to the beloved community. We are always on our way to the beloved community, the community where the oppressed are set free, where the dominant ones relinquish control, and where sins are confronted, named, dealt with, and forgiven. Where all people will do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with God. To God and to God alone be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.

² Peter Marty, "Becoming Less Defensive About White Privilege," <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/editorpublisher/becoming-less-defensive-about-white-privilege>, italics added. Thanks to Pastor Jen for sharing this!