

Bible Study
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19, Year A
September 17, 2017

[RCL:] Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Exodus 14:19-31

The Israelites have escaped their enslavers and are on the way to the land God had promised to them. From the Egyptians' perspective, however, these Israelites are their rightful possessions that have been stolen away from them. On top of that, these Israelites are responsible for plagues that have laid waste to their land and have caused the deaths of many Egyptians. They probably found it quite reasonable to chase Israelites and bring them to justice.

Yet they are baffled when God steps in and serves as a shield for the escaping Israelites. They are caught by surprise when God jams their chariots and throws them into the sea. They cry out because God is siding with the Israelites even though they surely felt they were the wronged party.

Wars are not fought by good guys and bad guys but rather by two sides that both think they are in the right. All of us are sure we are right sometimes, only to find out that we are mistaken. It is humbling to recognize that there is a greater power at work that knows better than we do, and it takes great strength to accept when we are wrong with grace. Righteousness needs to be held lightly, tempered by open-mindedness to others and prayerfulness to God.

- Can you think of a time when you were so sure you were right that you were blind to the perspectives of others?
- What will help you gracefully accept times when you are wrong?

Psalm 114

Lots of questions surround the parting of the Red Sea. It is easy to get locked into a discussion over if it really happened or how it could have happened, like trying to figure out the trick behind the magician's act. This is a distraction, however, that draws us away from the point of the story: It is a story about a people who were powerless to save themselves and about God saving them.

It is a story of salvation through grace.

This grand event of the splitting of the sea is an example of God's grace in action. The Israelites could not pat themselves on the back for a job well done. They shouted psalms of praise to God, knowing that no works they could ever do would be payment enough to buy God's love. God was to thank for all the blessings of their lives, and these blessings were gifts of grace.

It is easy to fool ourselves into thinking we have more power over our lives than we really do, forgetting to give thanks to God. Having self-confidence and taking pride in your accomplishments are great, but a healthy recognition that God's grace in our lives is important too – especially because God's love is freely given, regardless of anything we do to try to earn it.

- When do you find yourself distracted and forgetting to give thanks to God?
- When do you find your attention drawn to God's presence?

Romans 14:1-12

When Paul is writing the letter to the Christians in Rome, he is writing to a divided community: the Jewish Christians who were exiled from Rome and have since returned, versus the gentile Christians who had populated Rome in their absence. If this fledgling church was to survive, they would need to find a way past their differences, yet they struggle as if they were adversaries. Both the Jewish and gentile converts distrust and think themselves superior to the other, which sows disunity all around.

If there is one message Paul wants them to take to heart, it is that they are all the same in the only way that matters: They are God's beloved, for whom Christ died so that they may live forever. None of their differences compares to their one, essential similarity.

We, too, are faced with people all around us who seem different. We all have different values and can use those to judge ourselves superior to others, but God has already judged us all and found us all worthy of love, compassion and salvation. Let us not focus too much on how our differences stack up against each other, and instead turn our focus toward the God who sees us and loves us all the same.

- What differences with others do you find you have a hard time overcoming?
- In what ways do you see judgment and disunity getting in the way of the work of the church?

Matthew 18:21-35

Any community needs to determine how it is going to handle judgment and justice. This parable about the two debtors is often used as an illustration about fairness, saying that the first slave should have treated the second slave as he himself had been treated. After all, the debt his lord had forgiven was more than 500,000 times as much money as the other slave owed him (see Coogan's "New Oxford Annotated Bible, Third Edition," Oxford Press, 2007), so the first slave's behavior was hardly fair! This parable, however, is less about fairness than about how, fundamentally, Jesus values forgiveness.

Jesus precedes this parable by highlighting that forgiveness should be an overabundant principle. We should not even be thinking in terms of how much we should forgive; we should just forgive. We, like Peter, are being told that forgiving others – and forgiving ourselves – is never the wrong answer. The lowliest person is still worthy of forgiveness. The gravest transgression should still be forgiven. The most righteous and powerful people still need to forgive. Think of what a radical statement it would be for a society to say that their guiding principle is forgiveness!

If God has already forgiven through Christ's crucifixion, we should think carefully about what we are telling God and each other if we declare something unforgivable. We can have justice without losing sight of compassion, and righteousness without losing sight of forgiveness.

- When have you struggled with forgiving someone?
- When have you struggled with forgiving yourself?

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