

September 6, 2020
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 18—Year A
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

[Morning Prayer]
Psalm 149
Exodus 12:1-14
Matthew 18:15-20

Following our pattern of the last few weeks, I'll comment on the readings and then invite your thoughts.

Next week, we start a four-week observation of the Season of Creation. On those Sundays we'll depart from the Revised Common Lectionary. That's slightly unfortunate, because it interrupts our sequential jaunt through Genesis and Exodus.

Last Sunday we heard Moses resisting God's assignment, probably for good reason. For one thing, no one worthy of the job would actually think they were worthy of the job; for another, anyone with any sense at all would know from the start that the job will be difficult and thankless. During our homily time, I think it was Kyle who reminded us that Israel's freedom cost the lives of those Egyptian soldiers in the Red Sea. Today, though the details follow, we remember that it first cost the life of every firstborn Egyptian.

Because of our four-Sunday interruption, we'll miss, in sequence, the parting of the Red Sea, manna from heaven, water from rock, and the Ten Commandments. I started to say that Moses will be doing those things. Instead, of course, Moses is the human actor through whom God will be doing those things. Moses may be the most important Hebrew prophet, but his role is rather like that of a beleaguered project manager, one unpleasant aspect of which is herding cats. When we drop back in on October 11, the Israelites will be in the wilderness, rebelling by making a golden calf.

I might joke about herding cats, but God's deliverance of the Israelites is a hugely important story, and not just for Jews. The placing of the Israelites in the Promised Land continues to play a role in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. For a reminder about the importance of that geopolitical landscape to Americans, imagine Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Jerusalem for his Republican National Convention Speech. This story also comes home to us for very different reasons via its importance to Black Americans. Harriet Tubman earned the nickname "Moses" for her efforts shepherding enslaved people along the Underground Railroad. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., frequently used the Exodus story to speak about the civil rights movement.

Shifting gears, our reading from Matthew gives us Jesus explaining what to do with transgressors in the church. Remember, years after Jesus' death, Matthew is writing for his particular community of Christ-followers. We've noted before that Matthew has Jesus address questions that have arisen in that community. We recently heard Matthew have Jesus instruct his followers about washing food before it is eaten: as we learned, it is not what goes into the mouth but rather what comes out that defiles.¹ Here, Matthew has Jesus managing conflict. The conflict described is between two individuals, but notice how other members of the community get drawn in.

This reading first had me thinking about misbehavior within church communities. Where two or three Episcopal priests gather, there is likely to be a story of parish conflict. To be honest, sometimes the transgressor is the priest. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. Matthew didn't anticipate the extent to which Christianity would spread to encompass the globe, or the breadth of expression that Christianity would eventually take. The concern now is not just about individuals within a church; it's also about churches within a denomination; it's even about denominations within Christianity.

In Matthew, we hear the word "sin," but we all know that not all Christians understand "sin" the same way. What gets placed in the "sin" basket relates to other questions about salvation. How does all this work? Is the primary concern for individuals, or for communities? Is it really about personal behavior, or about societal justice? You'll have very different answers to those questions, depending on where you stand as a Christian. I think that takes us not only back to Jesus, but also back to Exodus.

Notes

¹ Matthew 15:17-18, NRSV.