

## **Pentecost XV September 13, 2020 Rev'd Dr. Shane Scott Hambleton – Rector**

Exodus 14:19-31, Psalm 114, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

In this morning's continuation of the story of Moses, we're about to hear about the Great Parting of the Red Sea as the Israelites escape slavery in Egypt. Those of us from a certain generation probably think of Cecil B. DeMille's grand technicolor movie.

Instant Walls of the Sea and Pillars of Cloud and Fire. And it's all here in the reading we'll hear in a moment. The Red Sea parts, the Israelites walk through on dry land – but the Egyptian Army is suddenly drowned when the Walls of Water crash down on them.

I have some problems with what's behind the epic story. It says “So the people feared God and believed in the Lord”. I have major problems with Belief or Loyalty based on Fear. That whole old time Religion of “Fear of the Lord” troubles me. Did they believe the God they feared was good or Just, or loving? Did the mothers of those drowned soldiers believe God was good, or just, or loving?

In my imagination I'd like to think my sermons provided people with concrete answers, but if, I'm honest, they usually provide more questions!

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading we see St. Paul struggle with questions about living in a diverse community and he has a very concrete answer. Rome was a very metropolitan community (As I was just living there last year, I can say it still is) The Christian community there was made up of converts from Judaism, Italians, Africans, and people from all sorts of countries and cultures. Some won't eat bacon or pork; some are vegetarians and they're all judging each other about food or cultural taboos. His concrete answer is to remind them that they may be a diverse community in some ways, but in a grander scale, they are all equal under God. I don't normally warm to St. Paul, but here I do. God is our Judge – None of use ever has the right to Judge our neighbor. Never Judge each other. As Jesus said “Judge not lest ye be judged”. That's pretty concrete.

And sure enough, that is exactly what Christ is going to teach us this morning in St. Matthew's Gospel. St. Peter is about to ask Jesus how often we should “loose people from their sins, Seven times? And Jesus is going to answer 77 times”.

St. Thomas Aquinas said of all the attributes, we can say of God – that he's all knowing or all powerful, or even that he's all loving – the highest most important, attribute we can say is that god is Merciful. Why is that the most important?

Mercy means not giving someone what they deserve. A cop pulls you over for speeding and you were speeding but lets you off with a warning. That's mercy or (driving while white). Mercy is opting out of judging our neighbor. But it still comes with a price.

Jesus is going to unpack the idea a bit when he tells Peter one of his incredible short stories – this one is about a king who shows mercy to one of his subjects who owes him 10,000 talents. It's an incredible amount. 10,000 talents, in modern currency is worth seven billion dollars! \$7 billion. A bit of storytelling hyperbole.

Remember, Mercy is God's highest attribute? The man owes \$7 billion and the king shows mercy and cancels the debt. It costs a lot to show mercy and forgive. It's an amazing story, but there's a hitch. The

story will go on to say that, that forgiven man goes out and bumps into someone who owes him 100 denarii- that's about \$10,000 dollars.

The difference between \$7 billion and \$10 thousand is enormous! The guy who was forgiven \$7 billion had the audacity to not forgive a friend who owed him far less. The king hears about it and was furious "You wicked slave! I forgive you seven billion and you couldn't forgive a mere 10K?? Go to Hell!!!

It's a bit scary that Jesus ends his story with a real-life lesson: "So God will do to every one of us if we don't forgive our brother or sister from our hearts. So how often do we need to do that? 7 times? No. 77. Infinitely, if we want to be forgiven our 7 billion debt, we'll have to forgive all our little 10,000 debts – even then they'll take forever to reach 7 billion.

Not forgiving debts/sins/offenses (intentional or not) gets exhausting. Keeping track of so many debts and offenses is debt-keeping like some accountant – a way of death and hell and totally the opposite of what Jesus is trying to teach us – world of grace, and mercy and unconditional love.

It's a total way of life that defines us as Christians. But does that mean we have to leave ourselves open to abuse? Certainly not. Forgiving isn't the same thing. Getting tangled up in "turning the other cheek" is a different sermon. This one's about forgiving as we hope to be forgiven. Mercy is about not giving people what they deserve. It has a cost we can't be presumptive about it. We can't just speed down the highway, endangering lives and telling ourselves "Nah, it'll be ok - the cop will probably be a Christian and let me off."

No! It's about hearing this story and picturing ourselves not as the one who receives mercy, but the one who gives mercy – even when it costs us \$7 billion.

The only way we can do that is to realize how much we've been forgiven – to rejoice in the mercy shown to us for our mistakes and debts and then to mirror that mercy even in the smallest mercies we show in others.

Once again, God has put the power in our own hands. Our judgment is in our hands – will we get mercy or forgiveness? It's up to us – depending on how much mercy, love, and forgiveness we show others. At least we have one concrete answer.