

18 Pentecost, Year A 2020  
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC  
September 6, 2020  
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Exodus 12:1-14   Psalm 149   Romans 13:8-14   Matthew 18:15-20

Instruction manuals. It looks like that's what we have in each of today's readings; and at first glance, we do.

In Exodus, we are marking the Passover, when blood on a doorway would save the life of the firstborn. The instructions are how to honor this event.

Romans takes a few of the commandments and says that these commandments are about loving our neighbor as ourselves – not an easy task (even on a good day)! Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry often says “if it's not about love, it's not about God.” Love your neighbor as yourself.

Then in the gospel of Matthew we have instructions for someone who “sins against us.” This looks like clear instructions for the church, and in some ways, it is, although we remember that the church of that time did not look like it does today. It would be easy to miss the depth of these passages if we read and treat them only as a list of instructions, as a “to do” list or manual. Let's dive into the deep on each of these readings.

Matthew is showing us the faith community's *participation in Christ*, how the church overcomes evil with good. When I have been hurt, I am to go to the one who has done the harm. Next is “the flip” to how we are *participating in Christ* by going to the other. We have given up “self,” given up any false or self-righteous suffering and laid bare the hurt *so that the community may be made whole in Christ*. It is Christ at the center of our step to reconcile, Christ whose we follow. Jesus gives us the example of hanging out with sinners – not for just any reason – but to reconcile them to himself. We are the sinners. And we are to do the same thing: reconcile ourselves – the plural ourselves – to Christ. We remember last week's passage that instructed us to leave room for God to have vengeance, not us. With that room “left over” we take the risk and discomfort of being vulnerable with ourselves in order to build up the body of Christ. Then we are participating not just in a list of instructions that we can read and see, but in the very life and body of Christ.

Moving back to Romans: we are reading a summary of part of the Ten Commandments, the laws of Moses, Love your neighbor as yourself. Our neighbor may not look like us, talk like we do, or even know who Jesus is. Our neighbor could look exactly like we do. Our task is to show others the way in which Jesus is at the center of everything that we do – and that changes everything. Jesus' presence among us transforms ourselves and the community. God-centered actions show others the Good News of the gospel, and that it is God, not ourselves or our egos that are the center of our being. We model not an appearance of the body of Christ, but a living, courageous part of that body, showing the courage to claim Christ and God's mercy.

The Passover story in Exodus shows us how to pull a story of God's grace out of the ancient past and put it in action in our lives today. The list of actions: what to cook, how to do so, eating hurriedly, and marking our doorposts with the blood of protection, of Christ – these are liturgical instructions. We enact ancient practices in such a way that we bring them to the present, not as an imitation of an event, but again as an invitation to bring God to the center of our lives. This time that center is in worship. We notice that we are to share our abundance, to provide not only for ourselves but for others so that everyone has “just enough.” There is just enough sustenance, there is just enough time, and more than enough God for everyone. For a moment of liturgical action we are called out of the world to remember a life-saving, life-giving event as part of the arc of history and the story of God's relationship with God's people. That is our ongoing story.

In yet another twist, we remember that it is God who initiates these actions in ourselves. God initiates spreading love and grace into the world, not through a narrowly defined list of instructions, but through the transformation of those actions into the very presence and actions of God. How appropriate this intentionality is for the present, for this strange year labeled 2020. We are in a pandemic of disease, of hatred, of silenced voices trying to find a way to be heard. Once again, the world, whether just outside of our doors or far away, needs the transforming power of God and Jesus Christ. In the calamity is God's invitation for us to respond to the chaos by taking action on those things which we can change, to bring God into those things over which we do have some control.

We can speak and act kindly toward everyone, including ourselves. Self-care, filling ourselves with the Good News of Jesus' redemption, empowers us to action. Action might mean wearing a mask, calling out inequities, and being the body of Christ in all that we do. We go to great lengths to reconcile ourselves and others to

one another. We exercise our freedoms and responsibilities with God driving our actions. We become active in the very grace of God, extending that grace to others just as God has extended that grace to us. What we do here, from our personal acts of piety, to giving back to God in all that we do, in worshiping and praising our Creator, we are calling Jesus' life saving resurrection into the present. Last week Moses stepped out onto holy ground. Today we are reminded of how our faith community, a place named The Church of the Redeemer, is made, by the love of God in Jesus Christ, into a holy place, into holy ground through which the world will know the power of God's mercy.

Lord, in your mercy, help us transform our footpaths into your holy ground. Amen!