

17th Week after Pentecost, Proper 18 – Year A – September 7, 2008
Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20
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I am sure that there are quite a few of us here today who love murder mystery novels, movies or TV shows. A few years ago when we were living in the valley, we became part of a small dinner group who enjoyed murder mystery dinners. The host selected parts for each guest ahead of time without knowing the way the story would unfold. On the appointed evening, dinner guests arrive in character and dressed for their roles – it's a lot of fun. The story is gradually revealed in the exchanges amongst the characters and between menu courses, and almost no one guesses who the murderer is until the final confession. The script cards are well written, and the whole scenario plays out beautifully in two to three hours. However, it is extremely discomfoting to get the reputation of being the mystery murderer.

This weeks' reading from Exodus is also extremely discomfoting. As soon as I read it, my heart clenched and lurched. We hear in this passage some of the most chilling words in Scripture: "I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord." We don't have scripted cards or dinner planned, but we do have a murder mystery on our hands. As I was preparing this sermon after reading this text, I realized I have a dilemma. I now have less than ten minutes to unpack, dissect, analyze, explain, or otherwise open up this portion of the Word of God with integrity and honesty, honoring what I know to be true: there is no violence in God.

The amazingly detailed description of the institution of the Passover festival is clearly of primary import to the writers and redactors of this portion of Exodus. The festival of the Passover is arguably *the* seminal event in the history of Judaism. And therefore, is also extremely important in our own Judeo-Christian tradition. It incorporates God's deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery to freedom, and God's protection of the Hebrews during a time of judgment on the gods of Egypt. From the perspective of the Hebrew slaves, the Passover is God's explicit favor towards His elect or chosen people. As Christians, we view the events and significance of the Exodus through the Christological lens of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Also through the institution of the new covenant that we remember and celebrate every week in the Great Thanksgiving feast. Our interpretation of the Exodus event is the liberation of all believers from death and sin to new life and freedom in Christ Jesus our Lord. From a Christian perspective, God's redemptive grace extends to all creation in the victory of the cross. In all honesty, we too are much more comfortable focusing on how good, just and right it is that the Hebrew slaves, you and me, are blessed with freedom and liberty from the horror of slavery. Whatever forms that slavery takes.

Eight minutes. In most commentaries there is an embarrassing silence surrounding the violence that accompanies this first Passover. Perhaps it is because the plain or more literal reading of this passage implies that God is a malicious murderer. We cannot solve the mystery by avoiding the issue. Avoidance is not the same as wrestling with the text in community and trying to understand God's self-revelation throughout the Scriptures. Shunning the apparent violence in this passage from Exodus is like saying that the Holocaust didn't happen, or that Christians did not slaughter Muslims during the Crusades, or that in the name of Christ the Inquisitors did not commit barbaric acts of torture. You and I both know that there are plenty of other examples much closer to hearth and home. The tacit understanding is that silence gives consent. To paraphrase Edmund Burke, all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men and women say and do nothing.

There is no violence in God. However, we cannot let God off the hook just yet without understanding that the source of all violence is distinctly human in origin. More specifically, the violent intent of our hearts and hands – mine and yours – occurs in at least two ways. The first is through buying into society's biggest lie that it is imperative that we compete for scarce resources. Heightened competitiveness combined with the fear of scarcity inevitably leads to violence. Not just physical

violence either. Emotional and spiritual violence are just as prevalent, and just as corrosive.

Unjust and corrupt power structures are now endemic in government and corporations across the globe. I am complicit in supporting them. We all are. Those who misuse their power perpetuate the myth of scarcity, mostly for financial gain, when God's truth is one of abundance. The second source of human violence amounts to *our* desire to create peace through violence, rather than following God's way of creating peace through justice. It is called scapegoating. A single person or a small minority are persecuted, ostracized, or otherwise expelled from the majority to bring about short-term peace. Often it is those we fear, because they are somehow different. Frequently it is the most vulnerable in society that become the victims of violence.

If there is no violence in God, what does it mean when we read about the death of the firstborn Egyptians that first Passover eve? What is God revealing to us about God's self from our post-resurrection perspective? We must remember that this is a time capsule account of a specific theological perspective. The questions to be answered are: who is God, and what is our relationship with God? The Hebrews have several important perceptions of how God has acted in these events. Two of which we have already heard – liberation from slavery, and deliverance through election. This understanding of God's role in these events also includes the demonstration of God's powerful supremacy over a pantheon of Egyptian gods, anticipating the first of the Ten Commandments. Then there is the understanding of God's judgment. As we heard in earlier readings from Exodus, the Pharaoh ordered the slaying of all male Hebrew babies, and hardened his heart against God, even claiming divine status. From the Hebrew perspective, the death of the Egyptians is simply God's justice and restraint. An Egyptian firstborn dies for each Hebrew child that was slain, no more, no less, despite God's supreme power. It almost sounds fair and reasonable doesn't it? Why do you think that is? That kind of justice is all too familiar and all too comfortable, precisely because it is how humans think: tit for tat; an eye for an eye; you took mine, I'll take yours.

Two and a half minutes. You and I have another perspective. We read Exodus, and all the Hebrew Scriptures after Jesus' resurrection, and we ask the same questions as the Hebrews did: who is God, and what is our relationship with God? God, as revealed to us in Jesus, is a God of love, mercy and compassion. God is a healer and giver of life, not a vengeful destroyer. Just as we discover at our murder mystery dinner party, the murderer is always human. God was not the perpetrator of violence that first Passover night, only the redeemer of a human made disaster. At that time in Egypt, the cultural precedent was to honor firstborns above all others. Practically that meant that firstborns received the first fruits in double portions. It is likely that the death of the Egyptians occurred because their grain was stored wet, and developed a toxic mold on its upper layers. As the grain was distributed according to custom, in double portion the toxins in the mold were lethal. The words of violence in this passage from Exodus, speak more of the Hebrews' all too human, vengeful desire for God to strike down the Egyptians. The reality is that God uses a human made disaster to put an end to another toxic situation: that of the cruel oppression and slavery of the Israelites.

The good news is that in all the situations of our lives, created through the good use or the misuse of God's gift of free will, God is constantly working for justice, truth and goodness. Throughout the story of Scripture God's justice is uniquely defined by solidarity -- not usually with people of great power by society's standards – but by solidarity with the innocent, the vulnerable, and the victims of violence. There is no violence in God. Together, let us celebrate and share with others, God's amazing gift, which is, and always has been unconditional love, abundant life, and the peace that passes all understanding.

Amen.