

2 Pentecost, Proper 6, Yr. A

June 14, 2020

Exodus 19:2-8a, Romans 5:1-8, Matthew 9:35-10:8

There are certainly times when one needs to struggle a bit to relate the Biblical texts of the day to current events, holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other as preachers are encouraged to do. But these times almost demand that you hold the two of them together, because the Biblical texts seem to be speaking loud and clear to our current challenges.

If we look first at the Exodus reading, what comes through is the covenant with God and the Israelites. The covenant that makes them a “treasured possession, a priestly kingdom, a holy nation. Of course, there’s a caveat there, as well. God starts by reiterating what he has done for them: the rescue from the Egyptians and the fact that he has sheltered and carried them as if on eagle’s wings. And then there’s that therefore – therefore, IF you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will be the chosen out of all the peoples. And of course, they all respond with an enthusiastic, Yes – Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do. We know, from history, that, all good intentions to the contrary, they weren’t always able to keep their end of the bargain.

We’ve talked before about being the chosen ones. And how we quickly interpret that to mean that there

will be special status and special protection. What it means, instead, is that will be special responsibilities. What God is asking of the Israelites is that they live in a way that shows God's face to the world. And that they work to construct a society in accord with the theology that says that each person is made in the image and likeness of God.

I think I've mentioned before about all those billboards in Dallas with messages supposedly coming from God. One of them said, "I love you, and you, and you." And on one level perhaps it's just that simple. Remember that God loves each person and act accordingly. So when God tells them that they are to be nation of priests, what he's saying is that they are to be servants of all. And what about that holy nation idea? In the Hebrew tradition, holiness means something set apart, consecrated for God. But it also has a powerful ethical dimension because it has to do with mirroring God's character of righteousness, right relationships, justice. The holy community, the holy nation, must belong to God, must exist for God, must be totally given over to God's purposes and intentions and because of the righteousness and justice at the heart of God, that nation was commanded to overcome injustice in the social, economic and political spheres. There's certainly an element that has to do with piety, but it's equally about remaking the world to fit God's original intentions.

Jonathan Sacks, writing about this, talks about it as the ethic of responsibility. It means that we are meant to be co-creators with God, and that our ultimate purpose is to honor the image of God in other people and by so doing, turn the world into a home for the divine presence. We are here, he suggests, to make a difference, to mend the fractured world. He also gently pokes fun at our response to all this with a definition of “responsibility” by the humorist Ambrose Bierce:

Responsibility, he says, is a detachable burden easily shifted to the shoulders of God, Fate, Fortune, Luck or one’s neighbor. In the days of astrology, it was customary to unload it upon a star. In fact there’s a story that God had to hold Mt. Sinai over the heads of the Jews before they agreed to that chosen status that brought so much responsibility. Christians who hurry to claim the status of chosen would do well to remember all this.

One of my colleagues in seminary was a young man from Belfast, Ireland. His observations about American culture were always interesting. At one point he observed that Americans talked a lot about their rights, but very rarely about their responsibilities. So, if you are going to push for chosen status, know that there is a costly responsibility that comes with it.

If we turn to Matthew, we hear the disciples being commissioned to go out into the world. It's rather the same. They are chosen to go out and proclaim the good news that the Kingdom of God was near – and that meant, again, the responsibility of curing sickness and disease, of demonstrating God's good intentions and desire for human flourishing and well-being. You'll notice, though, at this point in the Gospel, Jesus is primarily concerned with Israel. Don't go to the Gentiles, or the Samaritan villages, just to the lost sheep of Israel, he tells them. But, just as a reminder, by the time we get to the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has broadened his vision and the mission of the apostles – go therefore and make disciples of ALL nations is what he is saying then. We could have a conversation about the human/divine natures of Jesus. And it does appear that the human Jesus grew into a broader understanding of his mission as well – remember his surprise at the faith of Syro-phoenician woman and the Roman centurion.

In these days of division and strife with partisanship seemingly making conversation across different impossible, I would point out that when Matthew names the apostles, he adds a bit of information to a couple of them: Matthew the tax-collector and Simon the Cananean. I wouldn't have thought anything of that except that one commentator pointed out that

that meant that they were on opposite sides of the burning question of their day: what to do about the Romans. Matthew, as a tax collector, would have been collaborating with the Romans, Simon was a Zealot, working to overthrow them. And yet, somehow, the message of Christ was a large enough vision to inspire them both. Surely that can give us hope.

Going back to what I said about these scriptures being relevant to us today, I read a news article about a Black Live Matter demonstration in a town in Nevada. There were the protestors and then, opposite them, the counter protestors. Into this mix of people walked two men, carrying Trump flags and wearing KKK hoods over their heads. A police officer went up to them and talked with them. The upshot of that conversation is that they left. But following that, one of the BLM folks walked across the street saying something about coming in peace and one of the counter demonstrators said, OK, if you come in peace, give me a hug, which she did. He said that they ended up having a very civil conversation that was informative to both sides and which showed that there was more agreement than disagreement. Another sign of hope.

These are trying times. And our response as Christians is to live out of the vision we've been given, whether you call it chosenness, or discipleship, or co-

creators of the world. In the Matthew gospel, Jesus doesn't go in for false advertising. He tells his followers that it may be tough going – that they may be met with hostility and rejection, and because he's sending them out as sheep among wolves, they are going to have to be wise as serpents and yet gentle as doves. But he also reassures them that they are not alone.

What is our obligation as modern day apostles? We may have to stand up for the Christian message that we profess. And that may be uncomfortable. Just thinking about the Black Lives Matter movement and the group of demonstrators in Sister Bay, several held signs that pointed out that White Silence was part of the problem. It was a reference to the idea that all that was needed for evil to triumph was for people of good will to remain silent.

The collect for today prays that the church may proclaim God's truth with boldness and minister God's justice with compassion. Here's a quote from Robert Kennedy that Sacks used when he talked about the ethic of responsibility that fleshes out that prayer:

Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, that person sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a

current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

A tiny ripple of hope. Yes. Amen.