

Exodus 14: 10- 31; 15: 20-21
Romans 14: 7-12
Matthew 18: 21-35

Anger and Mercy
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It was a massacre. Total annihilation. It says that the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Hebrew people into the sea was dead. And then, with those bodies visible on the seashore, there was singing and dancing, with tambourines. Apparently, that's what liberation looks like. And every time we tell this story, and celebrate the liberation of God's people and their journey into freedom, we have to deal with the collateral damage.

Not that the Egyptians were noble or reasonable or admirable in any way. Not only had they forced the whole tribe of the Hebrews into hard labor and slavery, but they had practiced genocide and terrorism: ethnic cleansing through infanticide. And Moses, the Hebrew leader, had tried to negotiate. He had come to Pharaoh's court and told them that it was actually in their best interests to let the people go. It had taken 10 horrible plagues to convince the stubborn Pharaoh, including a kind of reverse ethnic cleansing: the death of a child in each Egyptian household. They could have cut their losses at that point, but they were driven – by revenge, thirst for power, fanaticism of some kind, who knows? They were driven to follow the Hebrews into the desert and even into the sea. They had so many choices to turn back before their mass extinction. The Egyptians, in this story, could not be rehabilitated. They were done.

Even those of us who wish this song of rejoicing over the deaths of enemies could have been left out of the Holy Scripture have to admit that the definitive end of the struggle between the oppressed Hebrews and the cruel Egyptians was a good thing. The nomads were free again, they could return to their homeland. Here is the question for all of us: **if** it were possible to wipe out the army of ISIS or ISIL, to strategically destroy just the soldiers, with no civilian deaths, would we pray for that to happen? If there were a way to do such a thing – which there is **not**, as far as I know – wouldn't there be dancing in many of our streets? We would be just like Miriam and her friends, weaving their line dance on the grisly seashore. Of course we would.

We ended with that verse, the rejoicing of a free people. But the Exodus story does not end there. Freedom does not bring contentment, or prosperity, or peace, or even devotion to God. Time and time again, the wandering people complain to their leader, as they did before they crossed the sea, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? We liked it there!" They suffer from hunger and thirst in their desert wanderings, and complain some more. When God sends huge flocks of quail for them to eat, they start to complain that they are getting sick of eating quail. Without the Egyptians as a threat, they battle other nations and tribes. Miriam – the one who likes to sing and dance – is struck with leprosy and expelled from the camp after making remarks about Moses' wife. Freedom does not make everyone happy, it does not make everyone nice, it does not make everyone generous. That's the way we are. That's the reason that a lot of drowned Egyptians is not the end of the journey to freedom. That's the reason that the destruction of an army in the Middle East will not be the end of the struggle for freedom there.

In fact, we are still working on all the commandments given to Moses and his people during that long desert trek. Not just the 10 Commandments, but all the others about loving our enemies and forgiveness of debt and treating the land well. 2000 years after the desert experience, the new surrogate for the Egyptian overlords, the Roman army, was in control of Moses and Miriam's descendants. A new leader of sorts came to teach an interpretation of history and law that really shook people up. Jesus understood human failings, he understood power and anger and revenge. He understood that people were stuck, re-living the old patterns, unable to think outside the box.

So we have Peter's question about how many times to forgive, and Jesus' answer in the form of a parable. Many of us learn the parables, either in Sunday School, or through reading or through preaching. And, often, we hope to come out with a simple message that puts the parable to rest: a simple life lesson, with straightforward application. What we often miss is how outrageous parables are. We miss the humor. We miss the expression on the faces of the people gathered around Jesus as they stare or roll their eyes or start to guffaw. Jesus often talks about the kingdom of heaven: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." and we think that we should be seeing streams of light coming through the clouds or a choir singing wordless, soaring notes. But picture this. Peter has asked a good, well-meaning question, and even offered a good, well-meaning answer: If a person keeps sinning against me, hurting me, damaging me, how many times does I have to forgive them? Seven seems like plenty, seven seems generous. Seven in Hebrew symbolizes completeness, a good guideline for completing forgiveness. In a way, Jesus is mocking Peter with his answer, no, not seven, but seven, seventy, seven, seventy, seven....times

Already the group of disciples and followers are starting to chuckle at Peter's discomfort. Then Jesus really starts to go over the top. There was a king with slaves or servants who were in debt to him. Really? What king allows slaves to run up debts? OK. One was brought in who owed 10,000 talents. That's the signal for the guffaw. Really? That's like the earnings of ten lifetimes, that's like a bazillion dollars. That's how much the slave owes? And the king allowed it to happen? Selling the slaves and his family and possessions is not going to recoup much of **that**. Then the slave gets down on his knees, asking for mercy and patience, saying that he will pay it back. Really? In what universe would you get that much money? So the Lord of the slaves says, "OK," and lets the slave go. Really? No negotiation, no pay-back plan for even a fraction? Then the slave goes walking down the street and sees another slave who owes him a little money, a couple of hundred dollars, and seizes him by the throat and demands full payment. Now. This new slave asks for mercy in the same exact words we heard earlier - "Have patience with me, and I will pay you" - which is not a crazy thing to say: there is a potential of doing what he asks. But no, the first slave throws him into prison. Really? In this world, slaves can throw each other into prison? More guffaws. The king hears of all this and brings the first slave in for a disciplinary meeting. Really? Since when did kings get involved in petty business dealings between slaves? The king asks the question that has already formed in our minds: "If I forgave such a huge debt, how could you treat another slave this way? Mercy should produce more mercy." And, with anger, the king hands the slave over to be tortured until he can pay his debt. Which, as we already know, is never. The laughter dies down. The parable is not so funny any more. Endless torture is not so funny

I wonder why these two passages were paired in our lectionary readings for today. Perhaps it is because both of them deal with slavery and freedom, with anger and mercy. Both of them teach that life is messy, and freedom does not always lead to goodness; mercy does not always lead to more mercy. In the desert freedom journey, in the elusive Kingdom of Heaven, there are no quick

solutions. We live in a world where we try out the quick, and often violent remedies, and then live out the consequences for seven times seventy endless years.

The human heart is so complex, so easily wounded. So are human societies. The first pharaoh to oppress the Hebrews was motivated by fear: fear of their numbers and prosperity, fear of their success. A fearful, yet calculated response of containment led to a sad history of death and pain for both Egyptians and Hebrews. So often we are motivated by fear and insecurity. In our calculated response of self-protection, we limit forgiveness to a manageable amount. The kingdom of heaven operates under a different math: in fact, the calculus is so foreign to us that we need to be shocked into it by the story of an angry and merciful king. Here is what I take from this parable today: we lock ourselves in prisons when we forget that we have been forgiven our debts, even before we have “done the math” with our neighbors’ debts. We torture ourselves with thoughts of what is owed us. In that torture chamber, our pain magnifies the debt into an unresolvable issue. Whole armies could die, and it would not be enough to make us happy or free.

Jesus ends his parable with these words: “forgive your brother or sister from your hearts.” This is not a rational exchange: “I have received this much so far, and I can give out this much.” It is about the cultivation of compassion, which does not keep count. It is about the cultivation of brotherhood and sisterhood, which does not do a genetic analysis to figure out whether someone belongs to my tribe. It is about using anger to champion the oppressed, while always tempering anger with mercy. It may be that it is about rejoicing about liberation while mourning at the same time. This is “heart” stuff: the gradual transformation of human souls and human communities, turning toward the light, seeking the Kingdom.

We will never bring back those dead Egyptians, we will never bring back the dead in Iraq and Syria, we will never pay back the bazillion dollars of spiritual debt we owe. But, today, in our hearts and with our hands and with our voices, we worship the God who saves us from our own sins of fear and insecurity. We can start towards the kingdom, one act of forgiveness at a time.

Let me close with words of blessing offered at the national service of mourning at the Washington National Cathedral immediately after the 9/11 attacks:
Go forth into the world in peace; Be of good courage; Hold fast to that which is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint hearted. Support the weak. Help the afflicted. Honor everyone. Love and serve the Lord. Amen.