

Sermon – Parting Ways

September 17, 2023

Scripture: Exodus 14:19-31, Matthew 18:21-35

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Our first scripture reading is Exodus 14:19-31. The Exodus event is the central story of salvation in the Hebrew scriptures and the crossing of the Red Sea is at the heart of this event. The promise Yahweh made to Moses at the burning bush to be Israel's Savior and Redeemer is fulfilled. The God of justice and mercy delivers the Hebrew people from oppression in the parting of the Red Sea. Hear now God's Holy word.

19 The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so, the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army and threw the Egyptian army into panic. God clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So, Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus, the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So, the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in God's servant Moses. Amen.

Our second reading, Matthew 18:21-35, is a parable Jesus told about this same God of justice and mercy when asked about forgiveness. In this simple story Jesus reveals a mandate for people of faith. Those to whom much has been given, much is expected. This is the Word of God.

21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So, the slave fell on his knees before the king, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So, my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Parting Ways”

*The Text: “Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea... the waters were divided.”
Exodus 14:21*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, give us the strength and courage to recognize when parting ways is necessary for personal growth and integrity in becoming the people you call us to be. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen

One day you finally knew what you had to do and began, though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice. It was already late enough...But little by little as you left their voices behind, the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds, and there was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own. These words from Mary Oliver’s poem “The Journey,” seem apropos for the culminating scene of Moses stretching his hand over the waters to set God’s people free.

It was time to part ways with the injustice of oppression and the parting of the water made it possible. The Israelites walk through the Red Sea to begin the journey of becoming the people of God. The walls of the water held at bay are a visual reminder of God’s outstretched arms of mercy, offering protection and shelter to a people who had endured unspeakable slavery, hardship, and hatred.

The salvation of Israel did not happen by some fluke of nature, my friends. Let us not be mistaken. Israel was saved by the God who is like none other, the God of steadfast love and mercy, the same “I Am that I Am” who came to Moses in a burning bush and promised to bring justice and mercy to the oppressed Israelites, the same God who offered Pharaoh numerous opportunities to end the oppression and let God’s people go, the same God who provided protection and atonement to all who participated in the Passover Ritual. This is the God who parted the waters of the sea and led the enslaved Hebrew people to freedom on the other side. In this parting of ways, a new beginning was possible.

The parting of the Red Sea has more than one meaning in the Hebrew faith tradition. The sea symbolized the power of chaos in ancient Israel. In their creation story God created the world out of chaos separating the waters above from the waters below. Because the sea had the power to breakdown structure, it was viewed as the ultimate opponent of God.

In the Exodus story, the Israelites walk through the middle of the world’s chaos to demonstrate God’s absolute power over it. God’s salvation is reliable even when opposed by evil chaotic forces. This ancient metaphor resonates with the chaos we experience today. As we traverse the chaotic waters of war, rising seas, turbulent politics, and storms within our personal lives, the God of our salvation gives us hope, perspective, and the strength to part ways on our journeys to becoming the people God calls us to be.

The parting of ways between the enslaved Hebrews and the Egyptians was necessary because of oppression and enslavement; however, there are times in our lives when parting ways is necessary simply because it is time and a part of God’s plan for our personal growth and maturity. Any parting is difficult, and Lot’s wife is not the only one who looked back as she left the chaos behind. We all regret and regress from time to time. Scripture tells us that the

Israelites, when faced with the challenges during their forty-year sojourn, longed for their days of slavery in Egypt.

Two weeks ago, when Peter, Paul and I were in St. Louis before Paul flew home to Houston, we drove by the house in Clayton that was our home for twenty-one years. We reminisced together, sharing a few memories of the joy and sorrow we traversed within those four walls. When we moved to Springfield a decade ago responding to Westminster's call to serve, it was difficult to leave what we knew. However, in Mary Oliver's words, *we knew what we had to do, and it was already late enough*. We were confident God made the way possible and it was time to part ways with our past.

Parting ways is never easy. In her book Necessary Losses, Judith Viorst explores how we grow and change through the parting and the losses that are an inevitable and necessary part of life. She writes:

I've learned that in the course of our life we leave and are left and let go of much that we love. Losing is the price we pay for living. It is also the source of much of our growth and gain. Making our way from birth to death, we also must make our way through the pain of giving up some portion of what we cherish.

There is plenty we must give up in order to grow, for we cannot deeply love anyone without becoming vulnerable to loss. And we cannot become separate people, responsible people, and connected people without some losing and leaving and letting go. (page 368)

The merciful God who parted the waters to save the Israelites from their oppression was committed to them becoming a separate, responsible, and connected people. The gracious king in the parable from the Gospel of Matthew forgave the slave a vast debt giving him his freedom in order for him to become a separate, responsible, and connected person. The good news of our faith is that we belong to a God who seeks justice and who shows mercy in order for us to become a separate, responsible, and connected people. We belong to a merciful and generous God who expects those who pass through the parted waters and have vast debts forgiven to also part ways with prejudice, pettiness, and stinginess.

May we seek the same justice on behalf of others as we have received from the One who parted the waters. May we become a separate, responsible, and connected people who share the same mercy with our brothers and sisters that Christ has given us. Amen.