Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020
St. John's in Diaspora
EXODUS 12:1-14; PSALM 149; ROMANS 13:8-14; MATTHEW 18:15-20

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus gives us the summary of the law: To love God with everything you have, and to love your neighbour as yourself. It's a tradition that reaches beyond the gospels, and we hear it in Paul's letter to the Romans today: "The commandments … are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'"

This summary of holiness—that we should love our neighbour as ourselves—has been important to us at St. John's. It's helped us understand why we should have compassion on our neighbours who are at risk of overdose: few of us would want to be left to die without help, and so we support community health initiatives aimed at keeping people from dying. This has been to us an act of love toward our neighbours. Similarly we've worked hard to find appropriate and healthy ways to share our green space at St. John's, as another expression of love for our neighbours. And last week I spoke about the importance of following public health protocols as we prepare to reopen the church building, in similar terms. It's not just that we want to keep *ourselves* safe and healthy. We want to do our part to keep the virus from finding any foothold and as a result extending this strange and difficult time. That is, we want to do our part in keeping people from suffering needlessly, as a very practical way for us to love our neighbour.

I'm going to come back to neighbour love—but first I'd like for us to look at Exodus. In the past weeks we've had Genesis in our readings, stories that focussed on Abraham and Sarah and the promises God made to them: that God would bless the whole world through Abraham and Sarah's family.

But now in Exodus, the emphasis moves away from the way God's promise of blessing is kept in a *family*. Exodus is about a much much larger community, and the ways that God's promise to bless all nations is kept alive in a whole people, the people of Israel, a people under great duress—a people in slavery to the Egyptians. A people that God will set free.

We hear this story of liberation in a time when we too are more clearly reckoning with questions of racism especially. I imagine we are all familiar with "Black lives matter," and the response by some that "All lives matter."

Which lives matter, as we read this story from Exodus? "Israelite lives matter." And our reading from today, about the passover, underlines this point again, with God saying "Israelite lives matter, and so I will show them a way to protect themselves from my avenging angel, so that it will only be *Egyptian* lives that are lost."

And so it seems that God, in God's efforts to bring freedom to a subjugated people, says something very different from "all lives matter." And as uncomfortable as this might make us feel, in God's willingness to bring plagues upon Egypt and to save Israel, God is saying something very different than "All lives matter." It really looks like God is saying "Egyptian lives matter a whole lot less than Israelite lives. In fact, Egyptian lives don't really matter at all."

This connection between God's protection of Israel—a people in slavery and under subjugation—and contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter, is not flippant, or glib, or frivolous. The connection between Exodus, and contemporary struggles about racism, reaches at least as far back as the Antebellum South, where Black slaves sang spirituals like "Go Down Moses." These sorts of songs told the Exodus story as a story of God's liberation of slaves much like themselves, and where the Pharaoh was much like their own slavemasters. They were sung as coded critiques of their own slavery, and sung as a way to guide fleeing slaves to freedom in the North.

Martin Luther King referred to Exodus in his own speeches, like his "I have a dream" speech given at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. "I would watch God's children," said King of Black experience and hope, "I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land."

James Cone, in 1970, in his landmark book *A Theology of Black Liberation*, reaches back to this tradition of reading Exodus as a story about Black experience and God's liberation. It was a book that partly influenced and partly inspired what would be called Liberation Theology, a Roman Catholic

critique of the Latin American political and economic conditions that meant the continued impoverishment of whole classes of people, especially indigenous people.

And doing my ministry training in the East Bay, I had the unique opportunity to take a preaching course from Reverend Dr. J. Alfred Smith, Senior Pastor at Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland California. Reverend Doctor J. Alfred Smith was named as one of the most Influential Black Americans by Ebony Magazine, and among the top 15 greatest Black Preachers in America not long before I had the chance to learn from him. And all of us, including three very white Episcopalians (one of whom was me), were expected to preach not from the gospels, but from Exodus, as a text about God's liberation of the oppressed.

And while the Black Lives Matter movement, and other contemporary critiques of systemic racism, draws from a number of different ways of thinking and acting, one of them most certainly is this theological tradition—the theological conviction that God's side is not with the subjugating powers of the time, any more than God was on the side of the Pharaoh. Rather God's side is with the poor, and those who suffer at the hands of the powers that be, just like God was on the side of an enslaved Israel.

But what of this question about Egyptian lives. Did they matter? I would probably begin to answer this question by saying that the actions of certain leaders—fascistic ones, for example—are part of the equation. We might say that at least part of the reason that Egyptians suffered was on account of a stubborn and self-interested Pharaoh, more interested in enriching himself and his lieutenants than he was in keeping his own people well and safe. That is, some leaders are willing to lead their own people to suffering for little more than the fulfillment of their own narcissistic self-interest, and for the sake of his own wealth and the wealth of his cronies. That the freedom given to those leaders can most certainly be abused and lead to the deadly neglect of the real interests of real people.

It would be of little consolation, at least to those dead Egyptians, that in saving Israel God would be able to keep his promise that all nations would

be blessed. Though I wouldn't want us to lose sight of this either—that the whole of Egypt, all those Egyptians (and perhaps even Pharaoh himself) are saved by God's work in Christ, a work that would bless all nations and save us all.

And we do have at least a small sign of this, a sign of God's care even of the Egyptians, in the next few pages of Exodus. As the Israelites fled Egypt, we read that a fleeing Israel takes Egyptians silver and gold with them. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks—perhaps the most senior Rabbi in the English speaking world—sees this not quite as the *plunder* of Egypt by the Israelites, but the *salvation* of the Egyptians. The way Rabbi Sacks sees it, "it was not the Egyptians as a whole, but only Pharaoh and the leadership, who were responsible for their enslavement." And that all that silver and gold was given up willingly by the Egyptians, gifts that "were meant to save the Egyptians from any possible future revenge by Israel."

I hope that some of us can find solace in the fact that God, in caring for a subjugated people by setting them free. But I also wonder if some of us can find solace in the fact that not all Egyptians were like the Pharaoh. That there were some among the Egyptians, who in their gifts of gold and silver to a fleeing Israel, were able to make a symbolic gesture, and to say: "Yes we benefitted from your slavery. Let's not pretend about that. But also know that not all of us are Pharaoh, and we can see that his ways are not God's ways."

But it was more than a symbolic gesture, it was a very practical gesture too, and in it the Egyptians were able to say: "So we are going to give you something of ourselves in order to help you materially and practically as you flee. We are going to give you our silver and our gold, the same silver and gold that was the fruit of your labour, not ours. Because your peace will be our peace, and your thriving will be our thriving too."

And so as God set the Israelites free *from* Pharaoh and free *from* slavery, the Egyptians are give the opportunity to be free *for* the Israelites, free to *give* rather than *take,* to see their own freedom in the freedom of others, to see their own flourishing in the flourishing of others. In a word, the

Egyptians were give the chance, through their giving, to love their neighbour.
This part of Exodus is primarily about God setting his people free. And we would be wise to be attentive to the way God's work in the world continues in the liberation of people, in our day, from such things as systemic racism. But there is something here for those of us who have benefitted, too, from subjugation, whether that be the wealth that comes from slavery, or the wealth that comes from the Doctrine of Discovery
and the Indian Act.

Just as some of those Egyptians said, symbolically and practically, that they were not on the side of the Pharaoh, offering their own kind of reparations in giving over the wealth gained from Israelite slavery, so might some of us continue with acts of love for our neighbour. They would be acts of reparation that recognise that some of us have grown richer at the expense of others, but that we are not of one mind about the policies of a political class that would prevent real systemic change for the sake of wealth preservation, and at the expense of the lives and the thriving of real people.

And that in loving our neighbour by giving back from an abundance that is not ours—that in this, in at least some small way, would put ourselves not on the side of a Pharaoh who subjugates, but on the side of the God who liberates.

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