

Issues of trust and of the joy that trust inspires lie at the heart of human life. It is not simply a question of "Whom can I trust?" but the matter, as well, of how the faithfulness of the one who elicits trust from the other may be recognized. In various ways the lections for this day address these concerns.

At one level the passage from Ex. 12, which provides instructions for keeping the Passover, presents daunting problems, for it seems to celebrate the activity of Yahweh, bringer of death. Yet while the difficulties in this text should not be lightly dismissed, they should not blind the interpreter to the deeper insight, namely, that Yahweh is one who may be trusted, for Yahweh defends those who seek Yahweh's shelter. In the end, the people stand liberated not just from Pharaoh, but from Egypt's gods as well. That is to say, the people stand liberated *from* all false loyalties and allegiance, *to* an allegiance to Yahweh alone.

Psalm 149 is one of those several songs of great joy with which the Psalter closes, yet this psalm is different from the others in its strong note of realism. The rule of Yahweh brings Israel to an understanding that the social order must reflect the moral integrity of the world's ultimate King. Injustice must be denied; the oppressed must be delivered. And all of this is done in a spirit of celebration because of the sovereignty of Yahweh.

The Epistle reading from Rom. 13 marks a point of transition within Paul's letter. Paul's ethical instruction, begun in chapter 12, will give way in chapter 14 to a concern for Jewish-Gentile tensions within the church. Basically, Paul is here urging his readers to trust the fact that faith in Christ makes a difference. It makes a difference in one's ability to "love your neighbor as yourself." It makes a difference in the joyful urgency with which life is lived.

The Gospel lection from Matt. 18 speaks to the importance of trustworthiness in the life of the believing community and provides

measures for the restoration of confidence and for reconciliation among members of the community in the face of injury and dispute. The trust exhibited among members of Christ's family is an important expression of the trust that characterizes the kingdom of heaven.

Exodus 12:1-14

The series of Old Testament texts relating to Moses and the exodus continues with this passage, which provides instruction for the keeping of the Passover festival. For Israel, ancient and modern, Passover is an unparalleled time of celebration of God's activity as Redeemer—an Old Testament "Easter," as some commentators have observed. And yet this text is marked less by a mood of gaiety than by one of sobriety, for the Passover event itself, accompanied by the death of all of Egypt's firstborn, is to transpire within a context of great suffering. Israel will be spared God's judgment, it is true, but the avenging Yahweh will move among the Egyptians in terrible proximity to the people of Israel. Not only that, but the moment of liberation will give way to new and, as yet, unfathomed experiences in the wilderness. Therefore, the mood of this text is muted, recognizing Yahweh's terrible power and justice but trembling at the cost in human life and security (false security, as it turns out) that must be paid.

Any honest hermeneutical treatment of this passage must face up to the terror within the text and to the God of death who is portrayed here. What kind of God would achieve some purpose—no matter how justified and benevolent—by bringing about the deaths of so many, most of whom we may assume are so young as to be innocent of the sins of oppression for which their nation is being judged (v. 12)? Does Yahweh not love the Egyptians too?

There are no completely satisfactory answers to these questions, and the morally sensitive interpreter of this text is left with an uncomfortable feeling. One may, of course, rehearse the usual explanations. The passage comes from a time when women and men, including Israel, were accustomed to think of supernatural activity in more warlike terms than is the case today. Thus, while the Passover texts are accurate in portraying the redemptive activity of God in Israel's life, they also reflect the thought patterns of the world in which their authors lived and worked. Another explanation is that, since ancient Israel conceptualized evil not in abstract but in personal terms, the only way in which God could be understood to be combating evil was if God brought judgment on evil persons or, as in this

case, persons who were members of evil societies. And these explanations point to important realities which must be taken into account in any effort to wrestle with such a text as this.

Yet not even these or similar explanations resolve the problem of Yahweh, the bringer of death. And the only valid means of moving beyond this difficulty into the genuine values of this text is to admit that the understanding of Yahweh as the Deity who slaughters the firstborn is partial and, therefore, distorted. One may understand why the ancient writers conceptualized God as they did, but, in the light of other biblical insights into the nature of God, one must also deny the portrait of Yahweh as the killer of the innocent. For example, that other great collection of liberation texts within the Old Testament, that of the Second Isaiah, viewed Israel's redemption not in terms of the destruction of Israel's captors, but in terms of the captors' *enlightenment* into the ways of Yahweh (Isa. 42:6-7). The prophet Jonah reluctantly bore witness to the God who loves all people passionately, even those oppressors who have earned the wrath of the oppressed, while Jesus demonstrated the love of God even for those who crucified him (Luke 23:34).

The error in identifying God as the slayer of the wicked or, worse, as the slayer of those innocent people who are kin to the wicked, is that it is so easy for a nation or a group to put on God's mantle and to begin to do God's work for God. The weapons of mass destruction have brought home to the human race more forcefully than ever before the folly of such thought and behavior.

But having said what one must deny in this text, the interpreter is bound to emphasize with equal vigor that which must be affirmed. As mentioned above, the grounds for this distinction are not subjective, but are based on the ability of other biblical texts to inform our reading of this one. That motif which stands forth as being of paramount significance in this regard is, of course, that of God as Redeemer. Thus, the symbol of the slaughtered lamb in this passage is crucial, as it gives substance to the New Testament image of Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Not only does Yahweh intend to save the Israelites in a physical sense, but Yahweh intends to redeem that special relationship which binds them to Yahweh and Yahweh to them. The struggle with Egypt is not only with its people and its government, but also with its gods (v. 12). Yahweh's liberation of the Israelites is understood by the text to be a liberation of the people from the power of that which pretends to stand in God's place. Again, this theme resonates within the prophetic word of the Second Isaiah, who, while valuing the worth of Israel's oppressors, ridicules their *ídols*, declaring that any

freedom granted by Yahweh is rooted in liberation from false worship and devotion (Isa. 44:9-20). Thus the institution of the Passover is not only a proclamation of that *from* which God redeems us, but of that *to* which God redeems us, as well.

Psalm 149

Psalm 149 stands among the marvelous grouping of Pss. 145-150 as a lyrical, doxological conclusion to the Psalter. Unlike every other psalm in this group, however, this psalm interjects a note of political realism and even military conflict.

The psalm begins with a repeated imperative summons to praise, a standard form in hymnic style (vs. 1-5). After the initial ejaculation of praise (v. 1a—matched by the conclusion of v. 9c), the psalm offers a series of imperatives and jussives, anticipating praise (vs. 1b-3). The whole of the song of praise is a "new song," that is, a liturgical action indicating a marvelous *novum* in God's life with Israel. The "assembly of the faithful" (*hāsīdīm*), the committed Torah keepers, are to meet for praise of God. The praise is invited by the jussive verbs of vs. 2, 3, and 5. The praise is to be enthusiastic (v. 3) and is to be done both in public (v. 1) and in private (v. 5).

The reason for the praise is that God is peculiarly favorable to the Israelite people, who here are understood to be exploited. Israel is not exploited in every season of its life, but this psalm reflects such a condition. Abused Israel, perhaps nearly driven to despair, is invited to liturgical celebration that is not primarily informed by circumstance. The reason for such praise in such circumstance is that Israel *with Yahweh* is so completely different from Israel *without Yahweh*. With Yahweh, Israel is assured of a protector and guarantor, who is the enforcer of Israel's rights and the enactor of Israel's well-being. The hymn gives full play to Israel's dependence on Yahweh, and the decisive difference made by the power and reality of Yahweh.

An important transition is marked in the psalm at v. 6. The first line of the verse is in substance and style a continuation of the praise of vs. 1-5. The second line departs from that substance and style, and goes in a quite unexpected direction. The people of Israel are to have "two-edged swords" in their hands, to take power into their own hands, and to act as enforcers themselves. The peculiar combination of exuberant praise and armed power is not unlike "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition." The second line is in deep tension with the first line, for the first line turns life over to God's wondrous rule,

whereas the second line legitimates human acts of a vigorous, even violent kind. In the latter case, Yahweh becomes the legitimator of such self-protective action.

The authorization of v. 6b is now further explored (vs. 7–9a). The purpose of such words is that Israel is to “do” (*ʿsh*; NRSV “execute”) vengeance and punishment, to imprison kings and nobles, and to “do” justice. The verb “do” might be noticed, because in v. 2 the term “Maker,” applied to Yahweh, presents God as the “doer” (*ʿsh*). Thus what Yahweh has done decisively, Israel is now to do.

What Israel is to do with its legitimated weapons is to impose social order (vengeance) on a disordered social scene, apparently disordered not by mobs and thugs, but by exploitative rulers who appear to be legitimate but in fact are not. There is, then, in this psalm a tone of “class conflict” between powerful lords of legitimate rule and needful Israelites who are victimized in a situation to which Israel is often subjected. In such a situation, the rule of Yahweh permits forcible action in order to overthrow exploitative power, for the citizenry has an obligation to oppose forcibly the practice of injustice, even if done by allegedly authorized government. Note well that such an authorization here is only for the sake of the oppressed. It is not a broader sanction for organized violence.

In v. 9b, this exercise of human responsibility for public justice against oppression is said to be the “adornment” (NRSV “glory”) of Israel, a point of pride and beauty. In this verse, as in vs. 1 and 5, the subject is “the faithful” (*hāsīdīm*), the serious Torah keepers. Thus the move from God’s wondrous rule to human action is not undertaken or authorized in a self-serving interest, with only a facade of ideological support. Such use of power in the public process is here legitimated only for those who understand their lives in terms of obedience to Yahweh, an obedience that entails attentiveness to the holiness of God and the neighborliness of social order. In our own time, of course, we have ample evidence of the ideological use of such religious warrants. The psalm affirms a Yahwistic base for military action against craven or ambitious exploiters. The psalm betrays no awareness of the ideological temptation in such an authorization.

Romans 13:8–14

This lection stands at an important juncture in Romans. Ever since Rom. 12:1 Paul has been engaged in ethical instruction. In 14:1 he will turn to specific problems that grow from tensions between Jews

and Gentiles within the Christian community. Today’s passage, then, brings the general ethical instructions to a close and sets the framework for what follows.

In 13:8–10 Paul moves from the statement of obligation in 13:1–3 to a positive assertion about the need for love: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” The lines that follow explain that love fulfills all the commandments, because love would never be involved in the adulterous act, in murder, in theft, or in covetousness. The difficulty with this injunction to love, of course, is that it becomes a new burden for those who feel that they must love everyone, for those who constantly measure themselves by their ability to love everyone. Others, rather than experiencing this demand as a burden, fulfill this call for love with a superficial and saccharine profession of love for the entire world, a love that never manages to find its way into the nitty-gritty of everyday life.

Two aspects of the text may guard against these problems. First, the injunction of v. 9 is to the love of the *neighbor*, not to some universal love. Even if the category of neighbor includes those usually regarded as enemies (see, for example, Luke 10:29–37), it nevertheless concerns those with whom one comes in contact. Paul calls for the difficult task of real love for real people who are met in everyday life, not theoretical love for humanity as a whole.

Second, the injunction is to the love of neighbor “as yourself.” Only a healthy, whole person—one who is capable of loving herself or himself—is capable of loving another. Love of the other does not require self-deprecation or self-hatred, emotions that in fact inhibit the ability to love others. Love of the other begins with a self-love that is able to acknowledge and enjoy the handiwork of God in every creature.

The final verses of the lection, vs. 11–14, may seem an alien intrusion into all that has preceded. With its ethical dualism and eschatological urgency, this section admittedly does differ from what has preceded. The urgency does, however, rightfully appear in close proximity to the ethical demands of this part of the letter. What makes it imperative that Christians behave in a worthy manner, both within the community and toward the outside, is that the time itself has grown short. There is no slack time, no cushion that allows for future correction. What happens now genuinely matters.

A second important feature of these closing lines is their utter confidence that Christian faith makes a difference. Just as Christians are transferred from one realm of belief to another (“we became believers,” v. 11), so they are transferred from one realm of behavior to another. Paul cannot imagine one movement without the other.

(For additional comments on Rom. 13:11–14, see the First Sunday of Advent.)

Matthew 18:15–20

The passage for this Sunday reminds us that Matthew's story was written initially for a small community, living in a hostile environment, that took its corporate life very seriously. The text in isolation reads like a legal manual on how to deal with someone else's sin, what steps to take en route to a member's excommunication. The cut-and-dried character of the process leaves us somewhat uncomfortable. We are not at all sure we want to deal with grudges and grievances the way this passage suggests, much less make it the basis of a sermon. But before we dismiss it out of hand, the passage at least deserves a careful reading.

First, we discover the remarkable context of Matt. 18. From beginning to end it points in quite a different direction from that of self-righteousness and harsh judgment. When the disciples ask, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" a child is placed in their midst, and Jesus says, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (18:4). Then the disciples are warned against putting stumbling blocks in the way of others and are invited to be self-conscious about their own manner of life (vs. 6–9). They are not to disdain fellow members ("little ones"). God cares about straying sheep and rejoices when one is restored. "It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost" (v. 14).

Following 18:15–20, today's reading, comes the word to Peter that forgiveness cannot be calculated. God does not keep a scorecard of rights and wrongs, and neither can we. Finally, the chapter concludes with the memorable parable of the servant who accepts from the king the generous release of indebtedness, but cannot forgive one of his fellow servants a relatively paltry amount (18:23–35). Withholding forgiveness to a fellow human being raises questions as to whether one has really discovered God's forgiveness.

The powerful images of pardon and mercy found in the context color the reading of 18:15–20. Forgiveness and restoration are the topics of the day. God forgives freely, and those forgiven evidence their reception of forgiveness by forgiving others. Thus, when we are the injured party, we are to seek out the person who we think has done the injuring and initiate reconciliation. We have no right to nurse our grudges, whine about our wounds, and resist efforts at

healing. We are to take the first step, to risk the engagement that can lead to a restored relationship. That surely is easier said than done, and the parable of 18:23–35 (to be dealt with next Sunday) addresses the difficulty.

The second thing we discover in today's passage is that situations of alienation are to be taken very seriously. Breaches between members cannot be simply glossed over or treated as unimportant. Nothing is gained by overlooking the injury, by not talking about it in hopes that it will soon go away. Forgiveness never happens by default. It occurs in the risky encounter between the alienated parties.

While the threefold process of dealing with the alienated party outlined in 18:15–17 may not always be an advisable process to follow today, it acknowledges the reality that not every participant will immediately own up to his or her part in the broken relationship. What if we take the initiative and are rebuffed—what then? The matter is not merely ours alone. The Christian community has a stake in brokenness and reconciliation—not only in the liturgical declaration of pardon every week, but in the actual relationships among its members. The church is under the same mandate of forgiveness as the alienated parties and therefore joins in the search for a resolution. One is reminded of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (5:23–24).

Briefly, the third thing we discover in the passage is the personal element. While a rather elaborate process is established, which reads like a manual of discipline, the first step comes in the face-to-face encounter of the two involved persons. The text makes no effort to probe that personal exchange, to indicate what words must be spoken or deeds must be done to effect restoration. "If the member listens to you, you have regained that one [literally, your brother]" (18:15). There is a certain reticence to go beyond the verb "listen," because every such encounter has its own peculiar dynamics. No rules can be drawn to describe what can or should take place.

The three concluding verses of the passage (vs. 18–20) underscore the critical importance of reconciliation in the Christian community. Precisely who "the two" are who agree is not clear. It is "the two" who visit the alienated member and who concur in excommunication, or is it the warring parties who have discovered healing? In either case, the agreement of two regarding a common request unleashes a powerful force: Jesus promises his presence.