

PROPER 19

Ordinary Time 24

*Sunday between
September 11 and 17 inclusive*

The Bible keeps returning to the primal saving event of the exodus. In that miraculous liberation, Israel receives its identity and its clearest disclosure of God. The Old Testament reading from Ex. 14, in stylized liturgical statement, narrates the exodus event. It tells of the massive power of God, and the decisive defeat of Pharaoh and his armies. It tells of the utter commitment of God to Israel, and of Israel's fearful doubt. As the story is crafted in this reading, it is a narrative "toward faith." It culminates with Israel's faith not only in God, but also in the leadership of Moses.

Psalm 114 is a buoyant, almost defiant celebration of the exodus, in which all the enemies of Yahweh are put to embarrassing flight. Israel enjoys immensely the humiliation of all who resist God. It is recalled that Yahweh's sovereign power to liberate is decisive for the world, as it is for Israel.

In the passage from Rom. 14, Paul struggles with the issue of freedom within obedience, and moves us beyond the letter of the law to its spirit. What is at issue for the apostle is not legal detail, but the attitude of faith which shapes human conduct. Not only are the members of the community of Christ led away from needless bickering, but they are led to faithfulness to one another and to the living Lord.

The parable of the unforgiving servant, which lies at the heart of the Gospel lection (Matt. 18:21-35), reminds all would-be disciples that law must be tempered with mercy in their dealings with one another if they expect to receive mercy from God.

Exodus 14:19-31

Many of the same questions that trouble the modern interpreter of Ex. 12:1-14 (Proper 18) are present in this lection, with its graphic portrayal of the drowning of the army of Pharaoh. But the emphasis

here falls more strongly on Yahweh's rescue of Israel than on the decimation of the oppressors, with the result that the proclamation of great good news resonates through this text.

The crossing of the sea is Israel's rite of passage by which the people became a nation. Behind lay Egypt and bondage, ahead lay the wilderness and freedom. Israel entered the channel, which Yahweh had carved by the strong east wind (v. 21), as a group of refugees, terrified and in panic. The people emerged on the other shore in awe and in an attitude of faith in Yahweh for this great miracle of salvation (v. 31). Although some commentators through the years have attempted to explain the parting of the waters by means of various natural phenomena, such attempts are irrelevant and distract one from the main thrust of the text. *Yahweh* saved Israel, not some fluke of nature. That which Yahweh promised Moses after the theophany at the burning bush (Ex. 3:20) has now been realized. Yahweh is their savior and redeemer!

Thus part of the emphasis of this passage lies on the weakness of Israel. As the climactic moment approaches, the Israelites are struck with terror over their own helplessness. They cry out to Yahweh (Ex. 14:10) and they reproach Moses for leading them into this predicament. "Weren't there enough graves in Egypt for us to be buried there and not in this terrible place?" they taunt Moses (v. 11). And then, like the naysayers that they are, they remind Moses that if he had just listened to them, their advice would have saved them. Better a slave in Egypt than a corpse in the wilderness (vs. 12-13).

The salvation of Israel, then, has nothing to do with the people's strength or cleverness, for if left to their own devices, they would never have emerged from slavery. The salvation of Israel was nothing other than the work of God, the same God whose revelations to Moses had been characterized by a concern for the oppressed and by a passion to bring to them justice and mercy. The walls of water that hold the sea at bay are emblematic of Yahweh's grace, which protects and shelters the people.

Thus, in addition to calling attention to the weakness of the people, the text emphasizes the power of Yahweh as redeemer. In the brief section vs. 19-20 Yahweh even moves to position the symbols of divine power between Israel and its pursuers, that is, the angel of God and the pillar of cloud (which also seems to be a pillar of fire, in that it "lit up the night"; cf. v. 24). They serve as a buffer so that the Egyptians are unable to apprehend the Israelites. Then the consummate example of Yahweh's strength is described as the waters of the sea, in response to Moses' outstretched hand, roll back in order to permit the Israelites safe passage. Even the drowning of the army of

Pharaoh is understood by the text to be an example of Yahweh's might, in that "Yahweh tossed the Egyptians into the sea" (v. 27; cf. 14:18).

That which Israel could not do for itself was accomplished by Yahweh, not because Israel deserved to be saved or contributed to its own redemption, but simply because Yahweh, a God of justice and mercy, chose to deliver the people from their oppression. As the authors of the book of Deuteronomy were later to reflect, it was not because Israel was in any manner superior to other peoples that it was saved.

It was because Yahweh loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that Yahweh has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh. (Deut. 7:8)

Another important element in this text is the role extended to Moses. Clearly what happens is the work of Yahweh, yet Yahweh does not work in splendid isolation or, like Zeus throwing thunderbolts, from afar. Yahweh works through the special agent who has been designated to act on Yahweh's behalf. Thus "Moses stretched out his hand over the sea" (v. 21), and the east wind opened a channel of safety. And again "Moses stretched out his hand over the sea" (v. 27), and the waters returned. The result was that "the people . . . believed in Yahweh and in his servant Moses" (v. 31).

And so our text is an important statement about the nature of God's activity in human life in general, and, in particular, it is a statement about the manner in which Moses' ability to lead the people is confirmed in their own minds. The crossing of the sea is as much a right of passage for Moses as it is for the people, for, although grumbling and discontent from the Israelite masses would trouble Moses in the days ahead, there can now be no doubt (at least in the mind of the reader of this text) that Yahweh's promise to be with Moses, made at the burning bush (Ex. 3:12), has been actualized.

Psalm 114

The present depends on what is remembered. Without a pertinent, available memory, the present becomes a chance for distorted perception and careless conduct. Psalm 114 is an act of powerful remembering that leads to present-tense confidence and ends in an awed warning.

In four short phrases, Israel recites its whole memory of life with God, from the slavery of Egypt to the well-being of the Promised Land (vs. 1-2). The first two lines are a dependent temporal clause: "When Israel went out from Egypt . . ." (v. 1). Memory begins for Israel in the exodus, in God's rescue of the slaves from the empire. The preface is lean; it need not be explicated. Israel knows full well that life has begun in a liberating miracle.

God brought Israel to a new home where the slaves had never been, to Judah and to Israel (v. 2). In that new place of well-being, Israel could speak its own language, the language of convenantal fidelity. All the years of suffering, risk, and jeopardy are bracketed by these two lines, beginning in slavery and ending in well-being. The memory invites Israel to be astonished and grateful.

The memory evokes a taunting, gloating, mocking lyric (vs. 3-6). The voice of this psalm is the voice of those long oppressed, now delivered and established, permitted a wondrous moment of exultant well-being. Israel cannot refrain from making fun of those who were so arrogant and abusive, but who could not even for a moment withstand the powerful intrusion of Yahweh. These lines express pent-up hostility; for a long time Israel was subordinated and had had to swallow its rage and resentment. Now Israel can at last say what it has long felt.

Verses 3 and 4 are imaginative descriptions of the past, seen through the trusting, liberated eyes of faith. The four characters are named and addressed: sea, Jordan, mountains, and hills. They are all cowardly failures who thought they could do what they wanted, but were deeply frightened when the Lord of liberation appeared on the scene. The psalm mocks all the powers of oppressive stability, in order that Yahweh should be praised as the One who has overcome and transformed reality.

The description turns to taunt (vs. 5-6). In four questions, the speaker makes fun of the same four characters, the sea, Jordan, mountains, and hills. The RSV phrase, "What ails you?" might well be rendered, "What's to you?" or we might simply say, with the NRSV, "Why is it . . . ?" The lines reflect the recently emancipated, now daring to walk boldly up to the former guards, the former police, the former intimidators, and daring to mock, make fun, tease, pull beards. The tone is that of newly gained bravado. It is Yahweh who "ails" the sea. It is Yahweh who intimidates the Jordan. It is Yahweh who terrorizes the mountains and hills. It is Yahweh, the Lord of freedom, the power of newness, the source of justice. It is Yahweh! It is Yahweh, and these bold witnesses accept life from and with Yahweh. They are free now to mock oppressors the way Easter

Christians mock death (cf. 1 Cor. 15:55–56). There is no more fear or intimidation for these people, because Yahweh has acted.

The psalm ends in an awed warning (vs. 7–8). The “earth”—all natural phenomena, all creation, all rulers and empires, all centers of power and authority—should tremble, quake, and twist in discomfort before “the LORD.” The one who comes is *’ādōn*; the Hebrew uses the starkest, strongest word for the sovereign One. None can withstand the “God of Jacob,” who has saved the “house of Jacob.”

This lyrical psalm is a doxology addressed to the tough, irresistible power of Yahweh. It is praise to God. A by-product of that praise, however, is acknowledgment that the God of power is also the God of justice who will tolerate no practice of oppression. Thus the singers are not theologically indifferent. They are poignant witnesses who have seen that life is inverted from death to life. Such an inversion, an Easter inversion, is indeed cause for singing, free and untroubled, buoyant and unapologetic. Each time the community engages in this taunting celebration, it exercises freedom from the powers of oppression and chaos that weary, deceive, and finally kill. This God is an alternative to the slow, hard death of intimidation.

Romans 14:1–12

Quarrels regarding religious practice plague every Christian generation, perhaps every congregation. In Rom. 14:1–15:13, Paul addresses some specific quarrels and articulates a theological framework for dealing with them. Whether these specific quarrels are characteristic of the church at Rome remains unclear, for Paul does not explicitly say that he knows about such issues being a problem in Rome. The issues themselves could have existed in many early congregations, especially in those that involved both Jews and Gentiles. The quarrels have to do with diet and with special days, although again the specifics are unclear. Some believe that their faith allows them to eat anything, while others (perhaps from concern about contact with food that would be impure according to kosher laws, or eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols) eat only vegetables (14:2). Some observe special days, while others regard all days as the same (14:5).

Despite the remoteness of these specific debates from contemporary Christian practice, many pastors will recognize and identify with the dilemma Paul faces here. How can quarrels be adjudicated without destroying the fabric of the community? What is most striking about Paul’s response is that he does not attempt to decide the

specific issues of food laws or feast days. He issues no call for an orthopraxis by which believers may be assessed or evaluated. Instead, he makes several important theological observations and trusts that they will lead toward reconciliation. In other words, in this instance the health of the believing community takes precedence over “right” belief or “right” observance.

The central conviction Paul brings to bear in this conflict appears first in vs. 3–4 and again in vs. 6–9: “Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall” (v. 4). Consistent with the argument of the letter as a whole, Paul asserts that Christians belong to God. God created them, and in the Christ-event God has reclaimed them. That relationship takes precedence over all others, without exception. For this reason, the specific religious practices or nonpractices of any individual stem from that person’s standing as a servant of God. The one who eats everything without scruple does so to the honor of God; the one who abstains from everything acts likewise. What matters is the integrity of the relationship with God, not the specific religious practices.

In addition to recalling that Christians belong to God rather than, first of all, to one another, Paul urges that people be “fully convinced in their own minds” (v. 5). Further on in this chapter he will articulate the unusual judgment that people who act contrary to their own consciences are condemned (v. 23), underscoring again the importance of conviction. To act contrary to conscience is indeed a dangerous thing. Whatever decision is reached about specific religious practices, the decision needs to have behind it the integrity of genuine reflection rather than the doubt and confusion that grow out of haste or group pressure.

A third aspect of Paul’s instruction in this passage is his injunction against judgment: “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?” (v. 10). As is evident already in Rom. 9–11, Paul believes that only God has the right to judge human beings. Christians certainly may not judge one another, for all of them serve the same Lord (v. 4) and must recognize the right of that Lord. Since all human beings are accountable to God, there is no reason for Christians to usurp God’s role (vs. 10–12).

To this point, it would appear that Paul is advocating a kind of individualism in this passage. Believers belong to God and are accountable only to God, not to one another. Believers must act out of their individual consciences and convictions. Believers will stand before divine, not human, judgment. A fourth feature of this text places that pluralism firmly within a community context. The entire section of the letter begins with “Welcome those who are weak in faith,” and

that “welcome” recurs importantly in 15:7. What Paul seeks in this passage is not merely the tolerance of diversity, a grudging acceptance of the inevitability of differences. Instead, he articulates an active welcome for those with conflicting views and practices. If Christ welcomed all people (15:7), then Christians must find a way to welcome one another and to respect the integrity of one another.

We would be quite mistaken to take this passage as an endorsement of any and all behaviors, for Paul elsewhere insists on certain limits. For example, the needs of the larger community dictate what one does in worship (1 Cor. 1). Similarly, sexual practice is not a matter of indifference, but must reflect the fact that human beings belong to God both spiritually and physically. What Paul has in view in Rom. 14–15 is perhaps close to contemporary disputes about forms of baptism or celebration of the Eucharist. What one group regards as permissible another will see as prohibited and another as required. These debates will always characterize the life of the church, as one or another emphasis comes to the foreground, but the debates should not prevent a common understanding of the Lordship of God and the servanthood of believers.

Matthew 18:21–35

The Bible repeatedly tells us that we ought to forgive those who have injured us. We know that. It is ingrained in our minds from the Lord’s Prayer and from passages such as the one listed for this Sunday. Congregations are full of people who know they should forgive, who intellectually recognize that there is some positive value in letting go of cherished hurts, but who find it well-nigh impossible to do so. Being cheated on by a spouse or double-crossed by a business partner are experiences that engender shame and rage, that leave the injured party feeling defective, defeated, and never quite good enough. To be told that one *ought* to forgive and let go of the pain simply does not effect a change; in fact, it may aggravate the situation by heaping a load of guilt onto an already enraged and shamed person.

In such a setting, we seek to read and interpret the two pieces of our lesson from Matt. 18. The first piece is a brief exchange between Peter and Jesus about the extent and nature of forgiveness (vs. 21–22). “Seventy-seven times” is Jesus’ way of telling Peter that forgiveness is not a commodity to be reckoned on a calculator. Not only is it limitless, but it cannot even be quantified. The language of numbers is inappropriate when one contemplates forgiveness. (This is il-

lustrated in the parable that follows, with the absurdity of the indebtedness of the first servant.)

The second piece of the reading includes the vivid parable of the king who forgives one servant an impossible amount of indebtedness, but that servant is then unable to forgive a fellow servant a reasonable debt. At first blush, the parable evokes considerable consternation. Why does the first servant, having been treated so generously by the king, immediately act so ruthlessly toward his fellow servant? He seems an unrealistically heartless ogre. No one would do that. The king is certainly justified in his harsh retaliation—torture and imprisonment.

But when we sit with the parable awhile and reflect on the difficulty of genuine forgiveness, it takes on a different tone. Does the concluding verse (18:35) mean that if I do not forgive those who injure me, God will withhold forgiveness? Is divine forgiveness conditional on my letting go of grudges and hurts? That seems to be the conclusion here as well as elsewhere in Matthew (6:12, 14–15)—though it is not necessarily so.

Look again at the parable. The most obvious point is that human forgiveness is rooted in divine forgiveness. The king forgives the servant an incalculable amount of indebtedness. Ten thousand talents represents more than the wages of a day laborer for 150,000 years! There is simply no way to measure the extent of God’s generosity when it comes to forgiving. “Seventy-seven times” doesn’t say it, and neither does “ten thousand talents.”

But what happens to the first servant? There is a remarkable gap in the parable. On hearing of his release from the obligation, the servant shows no appropriate response—no rejoicing, no gratitude, no celebrating with wife and children who are spared imprisonment, no reflection about the meaning of freedom. We hear only that on the way out he refuses the pleas of a colleague. The “gap” in the parable has to be taken seriously. The first servant clearly has not “discovered” forgiveness. We already see something of the problem in his initial plea to the king. Though in debt beyond any conceivable capacity to pay, he nevertheless makes his case on a quid pro quo basis. “I will pay you everything” (18:26). He imagines he is dealing with the king on the basis of justice. What he receives but never grasps is the king’s mercy.

Forgiveness has to do with something very different from distributive justice. The parable wants us to know that. The first servant still thinks of indebtedness/forgiveness as a power game. He has not come to view himself in a new light as a truly “gifted” person, the recipient of mercy rather than justice. He is not able, therefore, to see

himself in the same situation as the second servant, and is not able to show mercy as mercy has been shown. The final verse (18:35) makes it clear that forgiveness is a matter of the "heart," a transformation of the inner disposition of the recipient, something the first servant has not discovered.

How, then, does the passage address seriously injured persons, persons battling with shame and alienation? It portrays in a dramatic story the incredible kindness of God, who surprises people not by dealing with them on the scale of justice, even though they seek it, but by showing mercy. It invites readers to view themselves as forgiven debtors—no more, no less—living with and among fellow debtors. The difference between the debtors is only slight. To be forgiven means to give up the power game of playing innocent versus guilty, and to join a fellowship of forgiven sinners.

PROPER 20

Ordinary Time 25

*Sunday between
September 18 and 24 inclusive*

Except for the commonality of interest between the Old Testament and Psalm readings, the lections for this day appear to be more horizontally than vertically related. The Epistle reading inaugurates a series of selections from Philippians that lasts four weeks, while the Gospel lection continues the extensive readings from Matthew.

The Old Testament reading from Ex. 16 concerns Israel's primary memory of food given in the wilderness, given where there are no visible sources of life, given in the face of restless protest, given wondrously, inscrutably, saving Israel from both hunger and despair. The passage from Psalms is the fourth citation of Ps. 105 in recent weeks, the present text recalling the marvel of God's grace during the wilderness years and the people's joyful response.

In the lection from Phil. 1 Paul wrestles with the question of God's will with respect to his own leadership. The apostle's imprisonment seems to have cast doubts on his worthiness, at least in the eyes of some. Paul not only explains the meaning of his incarceration, but goes beyond that to explain the meaning of his life: "living is Christ and dying is gain." This reality is valid not only for Paul, but for his readers also.

The Gospel lection from Matt. 20 reminds the reader that in the kingdom of heaven the mercy of God is often surprising, even offensive. Persons are valued not because of their economic productivity, but because God loves and engages them. That which initially appears to be an outrageous injustice is portrayed as the greatest justice of all—justice motivated by mercy and grace.

Exodus 16:2–15

The story of Yahweh's miraculous feeding of the people in the wilderness is consistent with other narratives of the exodus from