

Sermon: "77"

New North Church, Hingham

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17 September 2023

Based on **Exodus 14:12-18 (KJV), 15:1b-11, 20-21; Matthew 18:21-35**

The exodus from Egypt was *the* defining event in Israel's history, and it still inspires people to escape bad situations in search of freedom, to think up for themselves some ingenious way to outwit their Pharaoh.

In American history, the Pilgrims understood their leaving Europe for America as a new exodus. Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson wanted to put Moses leading the Israelites through the parted sea on the Great Seal of the United States. Black Americans saw themselves reliving the Israelite experience after centuries of hoping for freedom and then fighting for their civil rights after they had achieved it. And in the 1970s and 1980s, the mass migration of Jews from the Soviet Union became known as Operation Exodus.¹ Hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews found new life elsewhere.

If you have ever watched the film, *The Ten Commandments*, you know how the Exodus story goes. In today's first reading, a new Pharaoh is in hot pursuit of the now-free Israelites, after the minds of Pharaoh and his officials *were changed*, saying, "What have we done, letting Israel leave our *service*?" (14:5)

Exodus gives us many passages where things can be explained by natural causes but then God amps it up, just to show us who is in charge. The nine plagues are a good example of that.

But today, we heard that, at a blast of God's nostrils, 'the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps *congealed* in the heart of the sea' (15:8). This is unnatural. Only God can do these things.

Why did all this happen? Verse four in chapter 14 can shed light on that: God wanted to gain glory over Pharaoh and for the Egyptians to learn that God is the LORD.

In the end, splitting the sea survives as a metaphor of our faith that God stands on the side of the unjustly oppressed, and that God's help can seem mighty mysterious.

Oddly enough, we don't always remember the LORD'S lessons.

And that brings us to the parable that Jesus told in Matthew's Gospel. It makes sense to follow last week's story about reconciliation with one about forgiveness.

When Peter asked how often he should forgive someone's sins against him, he guessed it might be as many as seven times. Seven was actually quite generous – the recommended norm at the time was three. So, when Jesus said make it seventy times seven, he was being extravagant; seventy times seven was an incredible number.

Then he told an allegorical parable to drive the point home.

He said, 'the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.' One debtor owed him ten thousand talents which was a sum equivalent to 15 years' wages for a laborer, an amount that no one could ever be expected to pay. How the man ended up owing so much to his king is not revealed to us, but the king forgave the debt after the man pleaded for mercy. So far, so good.

But trouble arrives when the same man, while on his way out and his head full of good news, bumped into a fellow slave who happened to owe *him* money. He violently seized the guy by the throat and demanded the hundred denarii owed to him.

Now, one hundred denarii represented about 50 days wages for a skilled worker, not a lot compared to ten thousand talents. We would expect the first guy to forgive this small debt in the spirit of paying it forward, but we would be wrong.

Instead, he threw his fellow slave into prison until he would pay the debt. How anyone can pay off a debt from prison has always been beyond me. At any rate, the story didn't end well for the first guy after the king found out what he had done.

We know that God is moral and does not rejoice in the deaths of the wicked. We can weep for the dead Egyptians just as we can boo for the merciless debtor. We should also know that Egypt remained Egypt. The Exodus story is about God's victory, not Egypt's defeat, nor is it about Moses or Miriam. God is the most important and most central character in both readings.

In Exodus, the people have just experienced redemption from the Egyptians by God. They express their faith and belief in songs of praise to the One who has done and continues to do great things on their behalf.

How does this connect to Matthew and forgiveness?

If the Israelites' escape is about God's limitless power and steadfast love, then Jesus' parable is about God's limitless grace and mercy and steadfast love – except for the wicked and merciless who get what's coming to them and we all cheer.

Ultimately, Exodus, like the Gospels, is a faith story. And these are great stories, but it should be in the back of our minds that they all mean something; they're trying to tell us something; there are lessons to be learned here.

What these two readings reinforce for us is how God defaults to offering mercy to the penitent. As God forgives us and extends mercy to us, we are called to offer grace and mercy to one another as a way of life.

Remember that we pray for forgiveness every time we recite the Lord's Prayer. And Peter asked, how often should I forgive? And Jesus answered, forgive as often as you have been forgiven.

Amen.

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¹ Tigay, Jeffrey H. "Exodus." *The Jewish Study Bible*, by Adele Berlin et al., Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 107.