

## September 4, 2011: PHARAOH WHO?

Exodus 12:1-14; Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20; Psalm 149

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Each September, Beloit College illustrates how the world has changed by publishing a snapshot of life as the entering freshman experiences it. This year, they note that “LBJ” doesn’t indicate a president, it is LeBron James. For these kids, there has never been an official Communist Party in Russia, there have always been electric cars and suspiciously disappearing frogs. On Labor Day weekend, we discover that significant labor disputes for this age group have only been in major league sports. Until this spring, when unions in Ohio and Wisconsin clashed with their state governments over collective bargaining rights. Collective bargaining is not Israel’s problem in Egypt. When God hears her cries, it isn’t about benefit reductions. When Pharaoh finally relents, it isn’t to improved work conditions; it’s to let Israel worship her own God. Pharaoh only asks one thing of them as they leave after the deathblow to Egypt’s firstborn. He wants their prayers when they worship.

That’s not in today’s text. That’s later. Today, what we have sounds like Iron Chef run amuck—how to choose a perfect lamb, fatten it, cook it, what to do with leftovers. The implication and action of that dinner is liturgy, the means of celebrating God’s liberation *before* the actual event takes place, pre-celebrating an event they will continue to celebrate in the *present* tense for (what?) 4,000 years now. The slave nation is on the verge of liberation, and God knows they’re going to need practices and institutions to shape that freedom. What better place than in worship, what better way than liturgy.

Then Jesus comes along, expecting his followers to live in community, even when they’re not blood kin. Maybe he learned from Pharaoh’s request of the Israelites. Maybe he just knows that, in the upside down world in which his followers are going to live, they will be expected to worship with, not just family and friends, but with people they’ve never gotten along with. Maybe people who own *them* as slaves. Maybe people who hunted them to persecute them. Maybe people whose theology seems all wrong. For Matthew’s Jesus, it’s not *whether* his followers will have disagreements, it’s *how* they go about addressing those disagreements.

Since that time, the reconciliation procedure Jesus outlines has been used as a judicial process in some churches and denominations—to correct members who’ve gone bad, hurt others, or done inappropriate things. Scholars assure us that this was not its intent. Like many things Jesus said and did, this was intended as a redefinition of how things oughta be. In this case, Jesus redefines the goals of confrontation, from retribution to rescue. When Jesus says, “treat them like Gentiles and tax collectors,” remember how he treated Zacchaeus. This is about caring for the offender in humility, what in Biblish is termed “community as the means of grace.” This is disputes resolution not to resolve outrage, but to hang onto the offender until he/she can straighten up.

It’s easy to misread this, to seem to justify public shaming or bullying of offenders. It can seem that injury to the offended party is minimized or blown off. What is at stake here, given the original question about “who’s the greatest?” at the beginning of the chapter, what is at stake is building a way of life in community, a discipleship of *humility*. This in no way minimizes the need of repentance in the act of restoration, nor does it preclude making amends. What matters isn’t *whether* we have conflict, but *how* we resolve it. Our culture’s highest values are individualism, autonomy, self-reliance, personal authority, so dispute resolution is often about being right and winning. In Eastern cultures, where Jesus comes from, personal dignity is the highest value, which means that in a dispute, resolution requires preserving the honor of your opponent.

This text is especially poignant because of the gathering in Minneapolis last week by a group calling itself the Fellowship of Presbyterians, a group of PCUSA pastors and elders who are looking at whether or not to stay in the denomination. At stake is their theological concern about ordination standards. The Fellowship ended with a set of tiers of potential action for congregations to consider. I didn't attend, so I don't know how discussions embraced Jesus' statements about reconciliation and dispute resolution. But I did have a chance to share my thinking on this text with one of the pastors who attended. I said, "God didn't create us to agree with each other; God created us to love each other." [See today's Romans reading.]

This is not a comfortable way to be Church. Last week I was reading Pastor Brian Heron's blog, Pedal Pilgrim. Brian is riding his bike 4,000 miles across the Northwest on a spiritual pilgrimage, asking people what the Church needs to learn and what the Church has to offer. The journey is enlightening as well as challenging—physically, emotionally, spiritually. At one point in the Colorado Rockies, Brian wrote that he was riding through areas so remote that finding places to get water and supplies are few and far between, let alone (this was his offhand comment) "a place to find a refreshing Coke." Whereupon, one of his Colorado friends following the blog, drove out to find him and hand him a cold Coke. Brian said his first thought was, "You can't do that!" But as he drank the cold gift, Brian realized he'd just spent six weeks accepting gifts and help from total strangers. "Why is it," he mused "that gifts from strangers are God sightings, but gifts from family and friends are an affront to the self-reliance of pilgrimage?" Acts of mercy are often hardest to receive from family and friends.

Which is one reason why Jesus gives the church the task of binding and loosing. Throughout this gospel, Jesus says forgiveness is where we receive our power to continue to follow him. You remember, "Forgive us our debts *as we forgive* our debtors." In that same prayer we also say, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." If we in the church do not forgive, who on earth is going to do it? Have you ever noticed that Jesus never says, "Believe in me," that he always says, "*Follow me*"? Following Jesus means living into the difficult discipline of forgiving. And that means giving it as well as receiving it. That's why talk of binding and loosing is associated with this passage. Binding—hold to the letter of the Law. Loosing—use a little mercy. The Church is given authority to bind and loose, not because the Church is right or even the arbiter of right, but because our portfolio is reconciliation, our language is confession and restoration. This is truly liturgy to shape our freedom! On Sundays, we confess our need of forgiveness on behalf of ourselves and the world. We extend and receive it. And then the worship leader says, "Since God has forgiven us in Christ, let us forgive one another. The peace of Christ be with you." *Since* we've been forgiven, we get to forgive others, and therefore we have peace by extending it to each other. We are the people most equipped on the face of the earth to talk about and model and do reconciliation, because we have been forgiven so much. This is about *reclaiming* those who get into trouble and who offend. This is not about punishing, although God knows that would be a lot easier and certainly more satisfying. Church disagreements (because they *will* happen) are supposed to be redemptive, not punitive. The peace of Christ be with you all.

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