

Community

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Exodus 12: 1-14

Matthew 18: 15-20

Introduction:

Both of our readings from the Bible today speak of community, of what makes community, of who's in and who's out, and how that transpires. Both passages describe efforts for the survival of communities that are under threat and both stories attempt to support the communities by making them free of outsiders, whatever that might mean. These stories or passages then seem amazingly relevant for today and so I'd like to explore them with you. Of course, one of the reasons that the Lectionary is so useful, is that this almost always happens. It's almost always so that one can make a connection between the story from the Hebrew Bible and from the Gospel, and that these stories from thousands of years ago can say something about our life today.

In the passage from Exodus, which describes the origins of Passover the Israelites are enslaved in ancient Egypt. As we heard last week, Yahweh, the god of the Israelites, appears to Moses in a burning bush and commands Moses to confront Pharaoh. To show his power, Yahweh inflicts a series of 10 plagues on the Egyptians, culminating in the 10th plague, the death of the first-born. Now these events are called plagues in the Bible, which sings a song for us today of course, though they seem to be somewhat different from what we would call a plague. One of them, for

example, was an infestation of frogs. These plagues were brought about by God to make the Egyptian king let the Israelites leave Egypt where they were being persecuted. Why? Because, as the Bible says, “the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them.” Sounds like a familiar complaint about all sorts of people, doesn’t it? This is what the LORD says: "About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt – worse than there has ever been or ever will be again."

—Exodus 11:4–6

Before this final plague Yahweh commands Moses to tell the Israelites to make a mark in lamb's blood above their doors in order that Yahweh will pass over them., that is that they will not be touched by the plague of the death of the firstborn.

That is a pretty stringent way of telling people who are not like you to stay away. In order for the Israelites to thrive, they must diminish the power of their neighbors who want to overcome them. Haven’t we seen this throughout history? If you wear different clothes, observe different rituals, speak in a different way, you must be kept away, diminished, or even annihilated.

I will come back to this, but first let’s look at the passage from Matthew that we just read. This seems certainly much more benign than killing all the first born except for one’s own. But it too is telling us how to handle “the others”. In this case, it is those who disagree.

Now, Jesus is mostly so welcoming and generous in his teachings - love your neighbor, help those who are troubled or weak, be a friend to those who are spurned by others. Here he is talking about how to handle a disagreement with someone in the congregation without having a big fight about it. But in the end, if the person persists in disagreeing, that person is cast out. That does seem a bit more advanced than the 10 plagues from Exodus, but it is far from embracing the other.

Development:

As we know, this arrangement of the population into those who are us and those who are not us has been going on for millennia. Sometimes it is something that simply supports our comfort and exists in our minds and the minds of our group. Sometimes it is made law and supported by military and police forces. There are economic issues at play so that those in power can maintain their power as well as the financial support of those like them; there are cultural issues also, issues which make one group uncomfortable eating, being educated or entertained with another group. Through history, groups have been organized around religion, skin color, country of origin, and often forced to stay within their groups of origin no matter how much these defining characteristics change over time. “Just one drop”, a phrase that we have all heard, is an example, describing the perspective that though Black people may have mixed with light skinned people over generations, just one drop of Black blood made them subject to the rules and punishments of white supremacy.

Isabel Wilkerson's new book, "Caste", explores these areas and shows how complicated and immutable these structures often are and how difficult it is to emerge from a society built upon them.

In a review of "Caste", the reviewer says that "when the Portuguese first used their word 'casta' to describe Indian social structure, they were repurposing a term that had been applied in the Iberian peninsula to lineages of people defined by descent. (The word shares its etymology with 'chaste' because a pure lineage was defined as breeding only within the group.)"* We can see just how prevalent this concept is, and for how long it has been part of human life. The notion of caste, of people who are below you and people who are above you, has been with us virtually as long as humanity has existed. It has preserved distinctions of culture, of language, of food, of dress, but it has also prevented many with skills, talents and originality to share these things with the larger population. If a person of dark skin cannot share what they know, how can the rest of the people ever benefit from this knowledge? We often think that those of lower castes, those discriminated against because of color and religion, suffer the most from these distinctions and repression. Of course, that is true, but it is also true that the discriminator loses out by being stuck in their own narrow culture.

You may have seen in last week's NY Times a wonderful story about Jackson Heights, Queens, "a neighborhood that contains multitudes." Containing multitudes is our national idea and it is what Jesus often talks about. Here is a community that seems to have escaped the notion of maintaining separations, that does contain the many altogether. The man who describes Jackson Heights talks of growing up in a building where

“the owner was Turkish, the super was Greek, the tenants were Indians and Pakitsstanis, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, Muslims, Uzbeks and former Soviet Jews. People who were killing each other just before they got on the plane for America were now living next to each other.”**

Scrabble was invented in Jackson Heights in 1938 by Alfred Butts and was first played in the Community United Methodist Church. Scrabble players now make pilgrimages to the church where services are given in Punjabi, Urdu, Bahasa, Korean, Chinese and Spanish. And, the Jewish Center in Jackson Heights also hosts Pentecostal services, Hindu services and the annual Iftar celebration of Bangladeshi and other Muslims. In addition, since the 1920s, gay people from all over the city and come to Jackson Heights where they have felt free to be themselves.

This week I took a virtual tour of the Crystal Bridges Museum in Arkansas. The museum is designated as a museum of American art and it does of course contain many different kinds of art from many different artists. I was stuck, however, that the piece that opened this tour was an eight by twenty-seven foot board on which was written We The People in the original cursive script. This cursive script, copying the opening of the Constitution, was made using hundreds or thousands of shoe laces - shoe laces of all different textures and colors, representing the beauty of diversity. It symbolizes what Jackson Heights may in fact have become; it demonstrates our possibility.

Conclusion:

To achieve a “We The People” civilization, we, as humans, have a long way to go. The god of the Israelites saved them from a plague of punishment sent upon their enemies. The Egyptians were their enemies because they felt threatened by the Israelites’s expansion and, indeed, we have seen that situation occur throughout history and all over the world. And, even if it were possible to blend all peoples together, we do not want to lose their cultural distinctions, the distinctions of language, of history, of style. No, we want all the shoelaces of “We The People” to remain distinct but still to be able to dance together, to spell out those words together in their distinctive colors and textures.

Here in our church we are coming to the end of our season of gathering. We are not such a mixed bunch beyond gender and age. Yet in our country chapel, we have had Jewish preachers and Buddhist preachers and we are open to more. As we go forward, do let us strive to be a little bit of Jackson Heights, a little bit of the We The People shoelaces.

*Appian, Kwame Anthony, NYTimes review of *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson

**Mehta, Suketu as told to Kimmelman. Michael in NY Times article of 8/30/20 *This Neighborhood Contains Multitudes*