



**St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene**  
**The Reverend Glenda Empsall, Deacon**

[Exodus 12:1-14](#), [Psalm 149](#), [Romans 13:8-14](#), [Matthew 18:15-20](#)

Creator God, may we recognize that we are members of one human family, each of us made in your image, all of us essential members in the body of Christ. We pray for wisdom to mediate and resolve conflicts that arise in this body, so that the community remains healthy and whole. *Amen.*

Two weeks ago, we heard about the 'new pharaoh who did not know Jacob;' Jacob, the man whose careful planning had saved Egypt and the surrounding countryside from starvation. The new pharaoh had enslaved the Israelites and murdered their male children. But 'life finds a way' and you all know the story of Moses, the baby in the bullrushes.<sup>1</sup>

Father David's sermon last week explained how the adult Moses arrived in Midian, became a shepherd, married the boss' daughter, and encountered God speaking from a bush that was burning 'yet not consumed.' God told Moses to return to Egypt and tell pharaoh to release the Israelites, 'Let my people go.' Moses had many excuses and God countered each one. In the end, Moses did as he was instructed.

If you have 220 free minutes, and you've never seen Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 cinematic extravaganza, *The 10 Commandments*, with Charlton Heston, Yul Brynner, Anne Baxter, Edward G. Robinson, Yvonne De Carlo, Debra Paget, Vincent Price, and some now-famous actors who were then so new in their careers they didn't even get credit for their bit parts, give it a watch. If nothing else, you can laugh at the special effects that are hokey now, but were state-of-the-art at the time. Remember, this is not history.

We began our readings today with verses from Exodus; God giving explicit instructions to Moses and Aaron for the ritual of the first Passover, a day of remembrance throughout all generations, a perpetual ordinance celebrated as a festival to the Lord. God sent Moses and Aaron to pharaoh to encourage cooperation. Pharaoh refused. God sent escalating plagues; water turning to blood, frogs, lice, flies, livestock pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness over all the land. As the final plague on the Egyptians, the Lord passed judgment on all the gods of Egypt... death to all the firstborn – including livestock. If there was lamb's blood on the doorposts and lintel, the Destroyer "...will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt."

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<sup>1</sup> Moses: Egyptian word, "to beget a child" Hebrew verb, "to draw out."

I don't want anyone to think that God gave up on pharaoh, or the Egyptians. God is infinitely patient and never gives up on anyone. God countered every one of Moses' refusals and supported him as promised. Look how patient God was with the Israelites when they turned away again, and again, and again – and with us! For better or worse, we make choices from our own free will and live with the consequences, but we are never beyond the loving reach of God.

Chronologically, the letters of Paul are the earliest texts of the Christian scriptures [even though they appear after the Gospels, which are also not in chronological order]. Paul's history as a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee; an enforcer of the law, struck blind on the road to Damascus, miraculously healed, dramatically made Paul the quintessential reformed persecutor of Christians, who became a passionate follower of Jesus, the Messiah.

Paul's strength for conflict resolution was persuasive oration. How can anyone ignore Paul's credentials or his passionate words? "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law..." Paul explained that the body of Christ has many members, each with its own critical function. One part of the body cannot say to another part of the body, "I have no need of you!"<sup>2</sup> To our detriment we claim to be rugged individuals, needing no one but ourselves. I believe this is a false narrative. If we learned anything from COVID, it is that isolation can be debilitating. We need to be in community with one another.

Most of Jesus' teachings in Matthew are instructions for how God wants people to treat one another – the 'little children,' the 'lost sheep' and to live in community. Matthew's community, his audience for this gospel, [in the last third of the first century CE] was diverse, composed mostly of Jewish believers in Christ, and some non-Jews [Gentiles] who appreciated Jesus' message of inclusion.

Matthew, chapter 18 is referred to as the "Community Discourse" or the "Sermon on the Church." In it are directions for achieving and maintaining healthy relationships in the community/church, including today's verses on how to mediate disputes. Because, as one commentary put it, "Whenever two or more are gathered ... it can be really hard to get along."<sup>3</sup>

How do you deal with conflict? I prefer to avoid it, but that isn't usually the best choice. Matthew's list is OK, but I think a few details of these critical first steps were omitted!

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/authors/audrey-west> 9-6-2020

1. If your brother sins. The word 'sin' as used here includes any 'offence' whether by the offender or the offended! Some translations lack 'against you.'<sup>4</sup> First, prayerfully consider your own part in the conflict. Why do you feel offended? Is this their first affront, or the third strike?
2. Go to the one who offended you and speak to them privately, in a safe/neutral space, without name calling or accusations. Listen and consider their response. Clear and open two-way communication requires at least as much listening as speaking! Listening is a skill easy to learn, sometimes hard to do.
3. If they listen to you, and you feel you have been heard, that may be as good as it gets. You may never get an apology. Each of you may still feel that you are "right." Agreeing to disagree is always an option.
4. If they do not listen, and you cannot let it go or walk away, take two or three people that both of you know and trust to be witnesses. The rules in Deuteronomy say, "A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offence that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained."<sup>5</sup>
5. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. But wait... Gentiles and tax collectors were accepted and welcomed into Jesus' community. Jesus sent his disciples to preach good news to the Gentiles. Matthew was a tax collector!

No one is ever beyond God's care and concern. We are to love our neighbors, even those with the weedy lawn and the howling dog. We are to respect the dignity of every human being, even those with whom we disagree and those we just don't like. At a minimum, we must continue to pray for them; not a prayer that they will 'see the light' and finally agree with us, but that there will be a healthy outcome, for the persons involved and for the whole community.

In Matthew's Gospel [5:18], Jesus declared that the commandments in the Jewish Torah would remain in force 'until heaven and earth pass away' but Jesus 'softened' some of the minor rules and offered his own perspectives and interpretations of others. In Matthew 16:19 and again here [18:18] Jesus reminds us, "...whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." I had to go to

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mt+18%3A15&version=NRSVA> footnotes a and b.

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 19:15

back to my Education for Ministry (EfM) second year text for this!<sup>6</sup> ‘Binding’ means that a commandment may apply to a situation the commandment does not explicitly address. ‘Loosing’ means that the commandment, while valid, does not apply to a particular situation. I’ll have to reflect on that for a while.

Finally, “...if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Remember that Jesus is always with us, even when we disagree with him. Be careful what you pray for, and always pray in good faith.

### **A Prayer of St. Chrysostom**

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplication to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will be in the midst of them: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. Amen.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pg. 134, Binding and Loosing. pg. 555 definition of Bind. pg. 564, definition of Loose.

<sup>7</sup> Morning Prayer, BCP pg. 102