



## Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Sept. 17, 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

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**Exodus 14: 19-31; Exodus 15: 1b-11, 20-21; Romans 14: 1-12; Matthew 18: 21-35**

Can't we all just get along? This was my first reaction as I read our scripture passages for this week. The Egyptians chasing the Israelites with murderous intent, admonitions for judging and despising others, and treating others harshly and without mercy – not any one of these actions are in anyway nice, are they?

What came to mind was country singer Kenny Chesney's song *Get Along*. "Get along while we can, always give love the upper hand, paint a wall, learn to dance, call your mom, buy a boat, drink a beer, sing a song, make a friend, can't we all get along. While this list of things we might do to "get along," may not work for everyone, it at least opens our minds to the ways in which we might try to play nice with others as we journey through this life.

Last week, we read the story of the Passover, the great works of God to save the Israelites when he enacted his final plague on the Egyptians. We skip over the actual exodus from Egypt, the reason why God told his people to get ready for travel and to eat the Passover meal hurriedly. In today's passage, we find our Israeli tribe on the shores of the Red sea with the Egyptians chasing them down.

From one scary moment to the next, the Israelites have lived through slavery, abuse, plagues, and now are finally free, only to find themselves at a stalemate yet again. Egyptians ready to annihilate on one side and a large body of water on the other. Yet somehow the Israelites have to believe that the Lord will fight for them.

And of course, the Lord does fight for them, by doing the seemingly impossible. Using Moses, he parts the Sea. Can you even imagine watching the sea part and then making the decision to walk through walls of water on your right and on your left? It's hard to follow the timeline of how things took place, did it take all night for the water to part, or was it immediate? Did the Israeli's make the crossing at night, since it seems that by morning the waters were filled back in? Did the waters start filling in behind the last of the Israeli's crossing, even though they were not all across yet? I think in this instance, it is better not to get mired by questions, but look at it from the standpoint of God's incredible saving grace, walking with the Israelites as chaos ensues before and behind and then making the way through it. How often have you felt the hand of God with you as you have navigated your own way through the chaos before and behind you? We can be assured, as the Israelites were in this story -  
- You are never alone as God is always by your side.

As we move to our epistle reading, Paul offers discourse to the Romans on welcoming the weak in faith and to not pass judgement on others who are living their lives in honor of the Lord in the manner they see fit. Why pass judgement on your brother or sister? We will all stand before God, and each one of us will be accountable to God.

I've had quite a few lessons in learning how to curb judgement of another this past year. My sister and I often joke that my brother must have been abducted by aliens at birth, as he is unlike anyone in our family. A changeling perhaps? He has chosen a path in his Christian walk that is quite narrow and, in my opinion, (or is this yet again another judgement?) presents a rather limited interpretation of how one must be, act, think, etc., if one claims to be in a relationship with Jesus. He is an avowed fundamentalist who takes the Bible literally.

There is little we can discuss about our respective Christian walks, as there is only one right way according to my brother, and apparently it is not mine. He has few interests, outside of talking to people about Jesus and trying to bring them to salvation or studying anything he can find on the "end times," and when Jesus will rapture his people.

We've had a few more interactions this year than is our normal, with many more opportunities for our differences to come to the forefront. My sister and I are both grateful to Fr. David for providing guidance on how best to approach and deal with the matters we had to work through with our brother. But it has been an ongoing challenge for me to love and not judge.

I keep reminding myself that my brother loves Jesus, and I know his heart is big and generous, especially with those in the community in which he lives. I also know I do love my brother, which helps me to temper my judgement. And every time I start going down that judgement path, I must remind myself that God made and loves each one of us, no matter how different we may be. And, how boring our world would be if we were all the same. No matter what I think or say, accountability is between God and each individual one of us – and God certainly needs no help from me!

In our Gospel we are again learning more about how to live in community, this time with the interplay of mercy and justice. It starts with Peter wondering how far forgiveness should extend – 7 times? And Jesus responds with 77 times, or in some translations 7 x 70 time – in other words, don't count, just forgive. The parable that follows balances the radical summons to forgiveness with an insistence on accountability and just relations. How do we walk that fine line?

First, we see extravagant compassion, not harsh judgment, with the master forgiving the servant a huge debt – 10 thousand talents is the equivalent to billions of dollars in our time. I wonder, how does someone get to the place where they owe another billions of dollars without some sort of recompense along the way. And, wow, what a huge thing that was done for this servant, to have the entire debt forgiven.

Next, we see that same servant denies this compassion to another servant who owes him the equivalent of about \$20 – hardly seems worth the effort to collect. Despite this person's pleas for more time, the servant that had his debt forgiven, has this man imprisoned.

Next there are whistleblowers who are dismayed at what the forgiven servant has done and file a complaint with the master, who then becomes enraged. The master calls out the servant he had forgiven and turns him over to the torturers. I can imagine something like the dementors in Harry Potter's Prisoner of Azkaban.

And we end with Jesus' commentary on the parable. He reinforces his earlier caution when he gave us The Lord's Prayer, that any who expect forgiveness from God are to be already practitioners of mercy themselves.

It is a story of extremes. So perhaps the point is to look at the larger message of this story. Forgiveness and mercy really matter. We all know forgiveness is not easy, but Matthew tells us throughout his book that blessing comes to those who are merciful. And accountability matters too. So how does one pit these two against each other? It's a real struggle. But perhaps we can look to the work by our church with our Sacred Ground initiatives, as an example of how this might work.

I joined a Sacred Ground circle this year, a program offered by The Episcopal Church, which is a film and readings-based dialog series on race, grounded in faith. In the program, we are exploring the history of race relations and learning the wrongs that have happened from one people to another, and looking for ways for reconciliation so that a healing can take place. In the history of our nation, it is predominantly white people of Northern European descent who have inflicted a wide-array of injustices on people of another color -- blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and indigenous people. It is slow, hard work. In my study of the materials, my eyes have truly been opened about the privilege society affords to me simply because I am a white woman of Northern European descent. This is in sharp contrast to what my black and Asian friends continue to experience today. This "eye-opening," if you will, allows me to start to see the injustices those who are not of white descent still experience in our country today. Perhaps, in some small way, my words and actions can help to reconcile and possibly amend these biases. It seems we should prioritize grace and mercy, and also hold ourselves accountable for what we do to others, by naming and accepting responsibility for the judgements we make, as well as any wrongful, wounding conduct. It is not always obvious, and it takes baby steps to recognize and see.

In this Gospel story, the first slave is not obligated to the master. He is now being asked to extend this grace he received to others. He is to pay it forward, not back. We too who have benefited from the generous mercy of God are called to extend that plentiful mercy to others. As our lesson from Romans from last week said, "love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore Love is fulfilling the law."

None of this is easy by any stretch. But when has following Christ ever been easy. We are called to get along as we journey through our lives living in community. And we all know that living in community can be messy work. The more we can approach this life from a place of love, the more we will be able to follow God's call to us to forgive and show mercy to our brothers and sisters and be able to express that forgiveness and mercy deeply from our hearts.

**Sources:**

- Working Preacher: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-24/commentary-on-matthew-1821-35-6>
- Matthew 6:14-15