

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 13th, 2020

Readings: Exodus 14:19-31, Psalm 114, Romans 14:1-12 Matthew 25:23-35.

Room to be People: Community Matters

Introduction

Central to Christian stewardship, to the harnessing and use of our resources, is the Christian commitment to the world, the commitment to community, to building community, particularly at times, like ours, when it is under challenge through the rise of multiple ideological and cultural tribalisms.

Last week, we focused upon the themes of freedom and forgiveness. The Hebrew reading, an earlier stage of the story of Exodus than today's concerned the ritual of Passover, a ritual which was designed to remember, to make present, the great freedom event of Exodus: something that remains central to Jewish identity today. The Gospel concerned the Christian interpretation of freedom as forgiveness, as *aphesis*, as release, letting go. For Christianity, forgiveness is the tool, the means for freeing the victim and the victimizer. This focus upon forgiveness as the means to freedom is of course grounded in the Christian understanding of human liberation through God's own forgiveness of us in Jesus Christ. But at a more immediate existential level, forgiveness has a way of revealing to us who we really are, clearing the fog from our fond imagination – encouraged by the secular – that guilt is just a religious construct to demean us. Forgiveness – ours of others and others of us, permits a deeper authentic understanding of who we are, a greater a sense of reality about ourselves: as Karl Rahner put it: *“Only the forgiven, only the pardoned, understand their broken-ness”*.

Today we continue along this dual path of freedom and forgiveness, read to us through again the story of Exodus and Matthew's rendition of Jesus' story of the unmerciful servant. The point, which cries out to us today, is the manner in which each of these terms, freedom and forgiveness are primarily expressed as broad social realities rather than individual/existential ones. For the Bible, the community makes the individual, mere than the individual, the community. The big picture comes first, the little picture, later. So, let's begin with the readings!

Readings

The Exodus episode today reveals a crucial point when it comes to the question of freedom, of liberation. The first is this: that initially the pharaoh “lets up” when he feels the noose of the death of the “first born” (12:29-33) around his neck. Even so, his decision to “let them go” is forced. His self-consciousness continues to be that of an oppressor, who simply cannot free anyone from his own initiative: he is a Pinochet, a Putin, a Xi Jinping, a Kim Jong-un. The vertigo of power overtakes him and he exclaims, “What is this that we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us”? He needs them as lord and master. Without them, he lacks identity, he no longer “is”. What is clear is that he will cease from being an oppressor only when the Hebrews take action, only when they save themselves *from him*. In short, the Biblical insight is that freedom is seldom if ever given, rather it has to be seized. It is Yahweh who facilitates that courage, that will.

The New Testament passage of the unmerciful servant is very rich indeed and to be understood accurately, should be read from the social and political context from which it arises. The story re-awakens the Biblical imperatives of Jubilee, the politico/theological manifesto through which the equality grounded in Exodus, would be renewed in the settled environment of Canaan. Two imperatives of the manifesto, appear in Jesus own teachings: the first, the remission, the forgiveness of debts, the second the liberation of slaves. Our story touches upon both.

In the age in which Jesus lived and worked, the Galilean peasant who had previously been a property owner, had been reduced to the practical equivalent of slavery, by way of progressive indebtedness. The one who had been decisive in this new state of misery, was none other than Herod the Great, having imposed onerous taxes upon small to middle landowners and expropriated those who had resisted. To escape such expropriation, the peasant would borrow from the money-lender at interest, who more often than not was connected to Herod's representative or at the very least, the local tax collector. His property which he gave as security, inevitably fell into the hands of the money-lender, and the peasant became more indebted: becoming at best a sharecropper on what had been his own land or worse a mere servant. But as if the problems ended there! His unpaid debts continued to spiral to astronomical levels and he and his family were sold into slavery.

This was the situation of the "unmerciful servant" in the story. Jesus describes the relationship between the rising indebtedness of the poor peasant, the loss of his property and finally his freedom. We then hear that the Jubilee year has been proclaimed, and the servant appears before the king, who forgives his debts, and frees him from his slavery. The word used is this special word, *aphesis*, or the verb *aphiemi*, forgive, remit, liberate, free. If the story were to finish here, then it would be encouraging. But we read on to discover that the very servant who has been forgiven an astronomical debt that he never could have paid, meets his own debtor, who owes him much less and he demands payment. Denounced by his fellows, the servant is arrested and led before the king who had just remitted his debt. To this man who offers no Jubilee to his debtor, the Jubilee will no longer be afforded. He will be sold for his debts, with his family. The sober insight: *There is no Jubilee for those who refuse to apply it to others.*

The points behind these two readings are summed up in freedom and forgiveness, social and economic freedom through forgiveness, release, from serial indebtedness, the very foundation of so called "free market" economies, even today. From a Christian Biblical and ethical perspective, "free market" economics is anything but. It is in fact a form of servitude, enslavement in chains, as many people know.

What is stewardship about? It is about using our resources for the purposes of life, rather than death, for witness to the sort of freedom that Exodus speaks of, the freedom, the liberation offered through the theological, social and political power of forgiveness that restores.