



**FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13<sup>TH</sup>, 2020  
STEWARDSHIP  
“ROOM TO BE PEOPLE”: COMMUNITY MATTERS**



Today and for the next two subsequent weeks, we focus upon the theme of stewardship – the idea of the use of our resources for the kingdom of God. This sounds a daring claim, and one that should be thought through carefully and critically, given the way religion can be manipulative of people as money is extracted to bankroll questionable activities and even the opulent lifestyles of self-described clergy – a phenomenon more common in the U.S than here. So to clarify: the point of Christian stewardship turns upon the commitment of our resources – physical, intellectual and financial – to an alternative vision of the world, where we have, to quote the words of the Argentinian theologian, José Míguez Bonino, “room to be people”, where, we have the oxygen to breathe and the space to live with love and integrity. In the current climate where world views and ideologies clash, this idea is not to be taken for granted. Today, as an expression of this idea of having the room to be people, we will think about the the concept, “Community Matters”.

In the major readings today, we discover the nature of community, that community is grounded in freedom, expressed through the broad theological, philosophical and political value of forgiveness: *aphieimi*, release, letting go.

The Hebrew reading is arguably the most important reading within the whole of the Old Testament – it is a privilege to read it – concerning the liberation of the Hebrew slaves (*apiru*). What stands out in this reading is the insight, not to be forgotten, that the Exodus is an event where Yahweh both creates a people and redeems a people. Christians often make the error that redemption (salvation) is a spiritual thing, disconnected from material reality. It is not! Redemption is always a concrete thing that has to do with the building of the reign, the rule of God in the real world. As if not to allow us to forget this point, the psalm (Psalm 114) labours to make it yet again: exodus is about the recreation, the tangible redemption of the world, of people, of the humiliated and oppressed. Little wonder that such themes are dynamite in the hands of those who suffer.

The New Testament readings of Romans and Matthew take up these themes in new ways, arising from their particular contexts. For Paul, the challenge is to navigate Christian faith that may become a source of life for people, not something that is rule bound, stuck, frozen in time. His attitude to religious dogma is surprisingly open-minded, hence is tendency to assume progressive view with regard to question that bothered the Christian community of Rome: rules of consumption and religious feast-days. The Gospel, continues the themes of last week, the idea of forgiveness, of release, of liberation, as central to the free community which Christianity seeks to create. This is a repetition of the Exodus theme of recreation and redemption, through a reawakening of the Hebrew idea of Jubilee.

## GATHERING

### **We Prepare Ourselves: Holy Spirit come to us (Taizé)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zasyz-tJkOg>

### **Welcome**

In the name of God,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

The Lord be with you

**And also with you**

### **Lighting the Paschal Candle**

### **Hymn/Song: Praise my soul (Henry Francis Lyte)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3dHeRB2c3g>

### **Opening Prayers**

This prayer arises from the Gospel reading for today, Matthew 18:21-35, but does so through metaphor, upon which I invite you meditate. Each metaphor is different and it will take you some effort to comprehend each in its own right. It was written some years ago by the Canadian poet, Andrew King. The thrust of these metaphors is toward life: that life without forgiveness – received and given – is no more nor less than death, death before death, death before we actually die.

Forgiveness is sending flowers  
with a card of congratulations  
to one who has come through  
suffering: yourself.

Forgiveness is taking the stone  
that broke the blade of the plough  
and transferring it to the centre  
of your garden.

Forgiveness is digging a hole  
into cracked and thirsty earth  
and not just pouring in water  
but planting a tree.

Forgiveness is emptying the goblet  
 into which you poured the poison  
 and placing it, clean and shining,  
 on the farthest shelf.

Forgiveness is shaking loose  
 the pinched, cracked skin  
 you have been living in  
 and leaving it behind for the crows.

Forgiveness is tearing in two the curtains  
 that enclosed your heart's hurting  
 and letting in the dusty light  
 to bathe the wound.

Forgiveness is removing the pins  
 from the wings of two  
 dead butterflies  
 and watching both those butterflies  
 fly away free.

**Peace: We share the peace with each other from our homes.**

This week the Ecumenical Prayer Cycle – “In God’s Hands” asks us to pray for the peoples of Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina. Below is a prayer for forgiveness couched in terms of God’s will that we respect both life and justice. It is written by Nélide Ritchie, who despite her English sounding last name was 100% Argentinian and the first female bishop of the Methodist Church of Argentina. She played a significant role in the life of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

God of life  
 you put in human beings  
 the imprint of your image and likeness  
 and made us to participate with you in your creation.  
 Forgive our incapacity to respect and protect life in all its forms.

God of justice,  
 you call us to travel this path  
 which is the only route leading to true peace.  
 Forgive our daily acts of injustice  
 which condemn many, many persons to death

by hunger, exclusion and war,  
and lead us to the abyss of endless violence.

God, incarnate in history,  
forgive us because we imprison you in our dogmas,  
limiting you to our institutions  
and crucifying you alongside the vulnerable of our time.

(Bishop Nélide Ritchie, Buenos Aires, Argentina. © Red de Liturgia del CLAI; English transl. Terry MacArthur, WCC)

## **LET'S HEAR THE WORD**

### **Some Thoughts about Life and Faith**

Often we think that the most important thing is for someone to believe in God, to believe in his existence, to have faith. Some years ago, former president Dwight D. Eisenhower, said that the most important thing is to have faith: it doesn't matter in what, just that one believes. And yet, if we think for a moment, we would understand that some of the most savage actions performed by human beings, have been caused by the particular faith, the actions of people who believed with all their heart and were truly convinced that they were serving God. Neither belief in God, nor the strength of that faith constitutes any guarantee. Rather, the important thing is *in which God we believe*. Is it, the God of exodus, the God of personal and collective freedom, the God who encourages us to give expression to the kingdom in this life?  
**José Míguez Bonino, Room to be People.**

In the story of Exodus, God is saviour on the terrestrial plane; salvation is closely related to the political and social spheres, in which independence was a concrete expression of the protection of its God. God is understood as saviour because he acts in human history, not in the first place in heaven.

**J. Severino Croatto, Exodus, A Hermeneutics of Freedom**

S.W Baron in his history of Israel, describes how in the age of Jesus, the Galilean peasant who had previously been a free property owner, had been reduced to the practical equivalent of slavery by way of progressive indebtedness. Herod the Great was the one responsible

for this situation. He had crushed the people with heavy taxes, and expropriated the recalcitrant property owners. This is exactly the situation into which the 'unmerciful servant' of Matthew's parable had come. Jesus describes, the relationship between the rising indebtedness of the poor peasant, the loss of his properties and the loss of his freedom, which flowed directly.

**John Howard Yoder, The Politics of Jesus**

### **Exodus 14:19-31: the liberation**

With this week's reading we reach one of the central episodes in the Book of Exodus, the flight of the Israelites from Egypt through the 'reed sea' as it is referred to in the Hebrew (later identified by tradition with the Red Sea). Following this will be the episode of the giving of the law and covenant on Mt Sinai. In the case of the flight of the Israelites, the last of the plagues, the death of the first-born, which had been associated with Passover (see Exodus 12), had finally convinced Pharaoh to let the Israelite slaves go (Exod 12:31-32). But the episode is not over. God has not finished with Pharaoh (14:1-4), who quickly changes his mind about his action in spite of his personal and national loss, nor does it seem that the people whom the Lord has delivered are entirely committed to their new situation (13:17-18).

The story itself is really a conjoining of various stories that have been woven together. That said there are some consistently dominant themes. Notable is the parallel to the Genesis story of the creation and the flood in the theological block Genesis 1-11. The sea, the symbol of chaos, is parted in the darkness of night by the mighty wind raised up by God. There are echoes of Gen 1:1-5, 9-10, but more so of the subsidence of the waters in Gen 8:1 after the flood. The Israelites go through the sea on dry ground (Exod 14:22) while the army of Pharaoh is overcome by the waters. These echoes of the creation and flood stories (the latter is essentially a story of 'uncreation' and 'recreation') bring the ideas of God as creator and redeemer together. Redemption and creation are two sides of the same coin. God's redemption of his people is that final act wherein God is seen as creator, the one who is God over all. His act of creation finds its culmination in the redemption of his people. The latter act is a new creation. That is why the passage through the sea is seen as the culmination of Yahweh's battle against Pharaoh in the plagues. One God struggles against another who is proclaimed as a god. But now even the Egyptians and other powers of chaos which would enslave Yahweh's people, know that Yahweh is indeed God – the one who creates and redeems.

<sup>19</sup> Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, <sup>20</sup> coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to

the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

<sup>21</sup> Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, <sup>22</sup> and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

<sup>23</sup> The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. <sup>24</sup> During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. <sup>25</sup> He jammed<sup>[a]</sup> the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

<sup>26</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." <sup>27</sup> Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward<sup>[b]</sup> it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. <sup>28</sup> The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

<sup>29</sup> But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. <sup>30</sup> That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. <sup>31</sup> And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

The word of the Lord  
***Thanks be to God***

### **Psalm 114: Exodus as re-creation**

Psalm 114 focuses on the exodus as its major theme and hence is a fitting choice for this

Sunday's lectionary. The psalm divides into four stanzas, each of two verses. The first stanza, vv. 1-2 introduces the theme of exodus. It ends in the NRSV with the statement that at the time of the exodus Israel became God's sanctuary or dominion. In the Hebrew, however, it does not say clearly 'God's sanctuary' but 'his sanctuary'. The poem does not resolve who is the real 'hero' of this venture or who it is that causes the sea to flee until the end (v. 7). We should keep that in mind as we read. Yahweh is not revealed as the god who does such marvels until v. 7 when the earth is called to tremble in his presence.

The second and third stanzas present the intriguing image of the sea and the Jordan River fleeing and turning away (v. 4). In addition, the mountains and hills skip like sheep. The third stanza then addresses these entities asking what caused their behaviour? The poem draws on the imagery of creation myths at this point, in particular the old myth of a monster of chaos, often understood in relation to the sea, being vanquished by the creator god in some fashion. This myth of creation seems to survive in the biblical materials only in fragmentary form (see Isaiah 51:9-10; Job 26:10-13; Pss 74:12-17; 98:8-11). The fleeing sea etc. in Ps 114:3, 5 is likely another use of this old imagery. The picture of the animals skipping at the appearance of God also has its roots in creation stories now mostly lost in the Biblical books. It is a reminder of the life that the creator god bestows. Another example in the Bible is in Ps 29:6.

- <sup>1</sup> When Israel came out of Egypt,  
 Jacob from a people of foreign tongue,  
<sup>2</sup> ***Judah became God's sanctuary,  
 Israel his dominion.***  
<sup>3</sup> The sea looked and fled,  
 the Jordan turned back;  
<sup>4</sup> ***the mountains leaped like rams,  
 the hills like lambs.***  
<sup>5</sup> Why was it, sea, that you fled?  
 Why, Jordan, did you turn back?  
<sup>6</sup> ***Why, mountains, did you leap like rams,  
 you hills, like lambs?***  
<sup>7</sup> Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord,  
 at the presence of the God of Jacob,  
<sup>8</sup> **who turned the rock into a pool,  
 the hard rock into springs of water.**

## **Romans 14:1-12: Paul navigates the labyrinth of progressive and conservative interpretations of faith**

Paul wades into controversy. Some believed very firmly that they should not eat meat. The issue was not vegetarianism in the interest of animals, but fear that meat might be contaminated since much of what was for sale would have been slaughtered by cult

personnel belonging to pagan temples. One might imagine that converts from paganism to Judaism would have seen this as fundamental to their identity. They would have seen it as impossible to contemplate eating meat. Many would feel very strongly and Paul implies that some would have condemned those who did eat meat. We cannot tolerate being in a church where meat eating is tolerated, we might hear them saying. It would recall the intensity with which some issues are debated today.

Just as serious would have been those who looked down their noses at those who abstained. Even Paul's designation of them as "weak" would probably not have been seen as complimentary. They are like fundamentalists, stuck in literalism, unwilling to see beyond the surface of things, one might hear them saying. Abusive and judgmental statements can be so destructive of community. Paul obviously sides with the "strong", who were probably radical Christian Jews like himself, but he is not willing to take a divisive stance towards "the weak". He wants both groups to accept their differences and live with difference in dignity. This was a big ask in his day as it is in ours.

There were also disputes about days. This may well include Jewish feast days and perhaps even the sabbath. Paul has made it clear elsewhere that he now sits very loosely to special days. He belongs to many of his day, pagan, Jewish and Christian, who had moved away from revering sacred times and sacred spaces. It was an intellectual trend, not unrelated to the shift from concern with cult to concern with ethics which we see in the great religions in the 6th century and thereabouts (e.g.: in Israel's prophets).

Paul's flexibility is rooted in his vision of Christ. He sees himself and all Christians as being answerable to that - indeed answerable to God. For him some central things are not negotiable, namely who Christ is and his radical offer of God's grace. Beyond that Paul has the freedom to be flexible, even with scripture.

**14** Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters. <sup>2</sup> One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

<sup>5</sup> One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. <sup>6</sup> Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. <sup>8</sup> If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die

for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. <sup>9</sup> For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

<sup>10</sup> You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister<sup>[a]</sup>? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. <sup>11</sup> It is written:

“As surely as I live,’ says the Lord,  
‘every knee will bow before me;  
every tongue will acknowledge God.’”<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

### **Matthew 18:21-35: The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant**

Last week we saw that the theme of chapter 18 is dealing with people who go astray. Matthew surrounds the traditional rules of conflict resolution with the message of compassion and forgiveness. Today's passage particularly emphasizes forgiveness.

The image of debt is helpful in considering the meaning of forgiveness. When someone is in our debt we have power over them. To forgive is to give up power. Forgiving is a form of giving. We no longer hold something back in our relationship with someone. Notice that we use words like 'hold' in expressions like, 'hold resentment'. Holding back is destructive for others and for ourselves. The movement of the gospel reflects the being of God. God created: God gave. The giving is also seen in the coming of Christ. It is a giving that goes the whole journey. It is the losing of protected life, the refusal to be devoted to a false self which keeps people at bay. It is a generosity which sets the cat among the pigeons, because it defies the arithmetic of merit.

Forgiveness is the force of facing up to reality, doing something which changes the equation. It disturbs the established values. This is clear in regard to reconciliation with Aboriginal people! People are afraid to be forgiven. Corporate guilt is another problem: it is difficult to deal with because we cannot quantify responsibility; we are afraid of losing control. Forgiveness and being forgiven is about letting go of control, accepting that debts can never really be squared. Grace given and received is the basis for reconciliation.

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>23</sup> “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold<sup>[b]</sup> was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

<sup>26</sup> “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ <sup>27</sup> The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

<sup>28</sup> “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.<sup>[c]</sup> He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

<sup>29</sup> “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

<sup>30</sup> “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

<sup>32</sup> “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ <sup>34</sup> In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

<sup>35</sup> “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

The Gospel of the Lord  
***Praise to you Lord Christ***

(All the readings today have come from the New International Version)

**Hymn for Meditation: It is Well (Audrey Assad, Horatio Spafford)**

This is a wonderful traditional piece that sings of the human and Christian capacity for inner-liberation even when circumstances crush us.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY5o9mP22V0>

## **Some thoughts.... A Conversation**

### **Let's Give: Our Offerings**

#### **Doxology**

*Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,  
praise him, all creatures here below,  
praise him above, ye heavenly host,  
praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.*

#### **Prayer of Dedication**

#### **Prayers of the People**

At the end of each prayer/petition the one who prays offers the words; "Jesus, may we be good stewards of our resources, and the response is "to build and respect community".

We listen to the "Our Father" (**Padre nuestro**) from Notre Dame Folk Choir, Indiana)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLIOVtC53xg>

#### **Closing Hymn: Guide me O thou great Jehovah (William Williams)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-tGSMLXEbc>

#### **Blessing and Sending Out**

The blessing of God almighty,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit  
Be upon you and remain with you always

Our service has ended.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord

***In the name of Christ***

**Mimina neema – Pour Your Grace (A Swahili Hymn from the Kenyan Church, Notre Dame Folk Choir)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdBKa7yExtM>