

17 September 2023, 16 Pentecost (Proper 19A, Track 1)
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Exodus 14:19-31
Psalm 114
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

Let It Go

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. Amen.

When I was too young to be home alone, a woman in our apartment building babysat me while my mother was still working. This woman shouldn't have had children in her care. She was mean – and not just from a child's perspective. She caused me and others real hurt, and I was afraid of her. Take my word for it, my fear was warranted. Even into my teens, long after she stopped babysitting me, I was terrified whenever I saw her. I remember passing her in the subway once. When she called my name, I ran.

One day, I saw her in the produce section of the grocery store. Dread and fear washed over me, and then: indescribable calm. I had a profound, transcendent experience of God. I didn't exactly hear a voice, but I felt these words in my spirit accompanying the calm:

She cannot see you because I have not allowed it. This is the last time you will ever see her.

Despite living near her through my high school years, I've never seen her again. More importantly, from that day onward, I stopped worrying about seeing her. I was freed from the fear that was holding me back, and, in accepting that freedom, I was able to let my fear go.

Last week, we looked at remaining in loving relationship with one another. The story of the first Passover feast reminded us to live into who God is calling us to be – not after everything is together and perfect – but now. It

also reminded us to live into who God is calling us to be together, supporting one another, worshiping together, and going into the world to proclaim God's love and grace.

This week's readings remind us that, to live into who God is calling us to be, we need to let go of anything that comes between us and relationship with God and each other. We need to let go of anything that impedes love.

The clearest example of letting go is forgiveness. In last week's Gospel reading, Jesus tells his disciples how to seek reconciliation when they hurt one another. This week's reading picks up right afterward with Peter asking a perfectly reasonable question: "How many times are we supposed to forgive someone who hurts us?" Jesus responds, essentially, there is no limit.

I'm sure you've heard that forgiveness is as much if not more for the forgiver as for the forgiven. When we do not forgive, we shackle ourselves to hurt and broken relationship. But the Gospel is about casting off shackles and restoring relationship. So, of course, forgiveness is key.

Jesus' parable expands on the theme of forgiveness and letting go. When the debtor asks for more time to pay his debt, the king responds with limitless grace. He forgives the entire debt. The king liberates the debtor and, in so doing, liberates himself. Debt no longer impedes love in their relationship.

The debtor does not do likewise. He holds on to the debt owed to him even when faced with the same words that prompted the king's graciousness. The debtor reimprisons himself. By failing to liberate another in love as he had been liberated, by failing to let go, the debtor forfeits his newfound freedom. The debtor lets debt overshadow love for the one indebted to him and reintroduces debt as an impediment in his loving relationship with the king.

Like last week, I'd like to focus on the Exodus reading. But, first, a preliminary comment. The Exodus story is profoundly sacred in Judaism, being foundational to the establishment of the People of Israel. We must respect that even as this story is profoundly sacred to us. As this story has been passed down and recorded, it has been interpreted as God hardening hearts and orchestrating Egyptian deaths. I don't think we necessarily need to understand the events of this story that way, and I don't believe that is how God operates. Even so, this story has some important truths for us.

Having finally let the Israelites leave, Pharaoh changes his mind again. He and his army pursue the Israelites. The Israelites are beset by the Egyptian army on one side and the sea on the other. They cry out to God and against Moses. Why lead them out of Egypt only to die in the wilderness?!

The Israelites had to let go of what stood between them and God's promise and love. They had to let go of their former life and identity as enslaved people. They had to let go of their belief that God was ignoring their cries for justice and freedom. They had to let go of the fear that freedom was an illusion. In this moment, the Israelites do let go. They cross the sea on dry land and trust that the waters would hold until they reached the other side.

Pharaoh needs to let go too, but he can't. In fact, throughout the Exodus story, Pharaoh refuses to let go of the impediment slavery is to relationship. This results in pain for him and his people. Pharaoh pursues the Israelites so intently that he ignores every sign around him. If he had been paying attention, Pharaoh would have realized that he needed to let go.

Having already suffered because he refused to let the Israelites go, Pharaoh never should have pursued them in the first place. Still, he won't let go.

When he and his army reach the Israelites, the angel and the giant pillar of cloud should have tipped him off that he was not engaging in a fruitful enterprise. Still, he won't let go.

Despite the pillar of cloud lighting the darkness and blocking his path to the Israelites, Pharaoh will not let go. Pharaoh fails to realize that the sea is split for the Israelites, not him. Still, he won't let go.

Even as his army panics and their chariot wheels clog, the army, not Pharaoh, has the good sense to flee – but it's too late. Pharaoh will not let go.

The Israelites and Pharaoh provide extreme examples of the liberating impact of letting go of the things that impede our relationship with God and each other and the self-destruction that results from not doing so. Friends, countless insert themselves between us and God and between us and our neighbors. The more tightly we hold on to those things, the farther we walk away from love and into imprisonment. The more tightly we hold on to those things, the more we hurt ourselves. By not letting go of the things that separate us from God, by not forgiving one another, by not seeing what God

is doing and wants to do in our lives, we deny ourselves the Gospel's liberation, the freedom and love incarnate in Jesus.

Both individually and as a faith community, we need to examine the things that impede our relationship with God and each other. Maybe it's holding on to old hurts. Maybe it's fear: fear of a person, fears concerning church attendance and budgets, fear of change. Maybe it's denying mercy and grace to others.

Let. Those. Things. Go.

Friends, holding on to things that impair our loving relationship with God and each other robs us of the freedom and joy God intended from the moment of creation. Holding on to those things shackles us to despair and denies us the good news of our freedom, salvation, and belovedness.

To live fully into what God is calling us to and intends for us, to do our part in God's mission of love and reconciliation, we have to let go of whatever stands between us and God, whatever stands between us and one another. What do you need to let go of? What do we need to let go of?

Amen.