

Learning to Modulate Our Praise
Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 17, 2017
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Exodus 14.19-15.1;
Psalm 114;
Romans 14. 1-12;
Matthew 18. 21-35

I put something together for myself this week I had never thought about before. Why I took all of my electives in seminary in systematic theology and why I can sometimes be a 7 year old when it comes to fairness in relationships. When I was in seminary I had so many questions about God and about humanity (I still do!) but at that time I wanted to put it all together and make sense of it from beginning to end. I realized this week that I like equations at least of the philosophical and relational kind (I leave the mathematical to others – those are not in my wheel house!) I like to understand how things hang together. If you tinker with a piece on one side, things are going to shift on the other.

So when Pastor Gordon started preaching last week saying the beginning of his sermon about judgment had its origins six months ago, I knew exactly what he was talking about. I was in the room for the book discussion he referenced last week when he offered up his discomfort with the idea of God's judgment. Only to have someone else in the group say that when you are oppressed the idea of God's coming judgment is a source of hope. Her comment created a disruption in my thinking and I've been doing some recalibrating ever since. The hope that God will make things right in the end was a foundational motivation for her faith. The moment she said it that way, I got it. Judgment (naming what is right and what is wrong) is the first move toward justice.

I get why talk of forgiveness can make people's skin crawl. At the moment that evil is breathing down your neck -a gun pointed at your head or an enemy closing in – we don't look for forgiveness. We look for the kind of justice that wipes that evil off the face of the earth. When that happens, it

makes perfect sense that you would jump for joy and raise your hands to God in praise.

This song of celebration in response to safe passage through the Red Sea is the oldest piece of written scripture that we have. Gordon read just the first verse of this larger song – this ancient poem. I have no doubt that if I were there I would be lifting my song of praise right along with them. To stand with the Israelites and look back at Pharaoh and his regime after 400 years of brutalizing slavery as they are bearing down to drag them back; to talk of forgiveness instead of liberation is to be utterly tone deaf. When the liberation comes, of course they lift their songs of praise.

But it's a complicated story. After the adrenaline drains and life moves forward and years turn into generations, the Jewish people look back on this story – this pivotal story of liberation – with a far more nuanced response. They have learned to modulate their praise. Their relief and joy at the prospect of their own freedom is now mingled with a note of grief for the death of the Egyptians. The celebration of the Passover Seder includes words like these: “We do not remember the plagues with joy. According to the ancient Jewish tradition, we express our compassion for the suffering of the Egyptians...although they were enemies and tormentors, they were also children of God and fellow human beings.”¹

To celebrate the elimination of our enemies is a deeply human instinct and we can trace it back to the oldest of our scriptures. Over time, as God lives with us in the mess and complexity of human life and God persists in this ongoing work of liberation – more is revealed to us of who God is and what God wants for us. With each new insight, our vision changes and what strikes us as worthy of praise shifts just a little.

Let's just say right here and right now – this is not some linear progression. The fact that we can so easily understand the impulse behind

¹ This is a line taken for the Passover Haggadah Seder we use when we celebrate Seder during Holy Week. It has been adapted with permission from “A Children's Haggadah”, prepared by Temple Emmanuel in Grand Rapids, MI. It was edited by Rabbi Leon Klenicki with introductions by Gabe Huck and published by the Anti-Defamation League of B'Nai B'rith and the Liturgy Training Program of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

the Song of Moses and Miriam speaks to how we are forever circling back and learning again.

For heaven's sake the disciples in the gospel of Matthew eons since the song of Moses and Miriam and years into their time following Jesus are still back in that same mentality when they ask Jesus at the beginning of Matthew 18: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Or in Luke chapter 9 when a Samaritan city refuses to welcome them they ask him: "Lord do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"² Or even after the resurrection when Jesus is about to leave them in charge of carrying forward the gospel message they ask again: "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"³ (That is...help us destroy our enemies once and for all!) This instinct in us is strong!

When Jesus reminds them again of God's way - the way of forgiveness - Peter ask the question we all ask "how often should I forgive?" By which he means where is the boundary and the limit because there is only so far this forgiving heart can go! The answer as we well know is that it goes on forever.

So Jesus tells a parable to show just how far it goes. The debt of the slave in this parable is ten thousand talents. Read the footnote. A single talent is worth more than fifteen years' worth of wages. That's just one talent and he owes ten thousand! It's an absurdly large number. After some back and forth between the king and the slave, he is forgiven the entire debt. That's how far the mercy and grace of God extends for us....to absurd lengths that we do not deserve.

That's a beautiful message if you are the one who owes that kind of debt. It's a whole other deal if you are the one to whom the debt is owed. Let's go back to the bully I spoke of with the children. If after weeks and weeks of teasing and taunting and tormenting another child and the day of reckoning comes - it is a beautiful thing if you can receive mercy and forgiveness. But what about the child who has been living in trembling

² Luke 9.54, NRSV

³ Acts 1.6, NRSV

fear? Where is the judgment that calls out the pain and the suffering? Where is the justice that assures that child that the pain and suffering will end?

I'm back to that part where I get why talk of forgiveness can make a person's skin crawl. Apparently, Jesus gets it too. Because he's not quite done yet. The second part of the parable makes clear that this work of forgiveness and mercy that God is up to with us is not transactional. This is not some big cosmic ledger listing all of our failures that God just wipes clean so we can go on our way as we were before without owing anything to anyone.

No! Forgiveness is meant to be transformational. It is a moment to have a mirror put up in front of us to see what we have done, perhaps even understand more about why we have done it. What broke? What do we need to fix it? Only as we receive the beautiful gift of mercy **and** do the hard work of repentance (which is churchy language for "turn around and stop it!") that we walk away transformed. Having had that experience of transformation and forgiveness we look to keep that mercy circulating. That's what God is up to with us. This is not cheap grace but deep transformative grace that disrupts those never-ending cycles of violation and retaliation to introduce a new cycle of forgiveness and repentance.

This parable ends in a very uncomfortable place...back to that discomfort Pastor Gordon named last week with God's judgment. Truth be told, I haven't worked the equation all the way out yet. All I will say, is that this dramatic ending makes clear that God shares our concern that forgiveness should never be used as a free pass for oppressors to keep oppressing. That is not what God has in mind.

And here's one other piece of the equation: this is not on us as individuals alone. This is something we do together as community. We confront harm when it shows up and if we can't do it alone, we bring others with us. And frankly sometimes we send others **for** us. Did you notice the role of the fellow servants - the ones who witnessed the abuse and reported it back to the to the king? We are in this together.

No matter what position you hold - the one who has been wronged and oppressed; the one who has caused harm; the one who is witness to the injustice - there is hard and complicated work that God is seeking to do with us.

The distance between the place where we are right now and the place that God ultimately wants to bring us may seem daunting. But perhaps we could learn to modulate just one step along the way and see what God unfolds in us.

I wanted to offer a word of blessing as God does this hard and complicated work in us. I quickly recognized that the position we hold determines the kind of blessing we need. So rather than one I offer three. They are on the green paper at the edge of your pew (or listed below for those reading online!) If you are sitting there can you pass them down. Just scan the first line or two and find the one that is yours for today.

Read it prayerfully and let the blessing of God wash over you as we TOGETHER enter into this journey of forgiveness.

A Blessing or You from the God of Pardon

May you find God's blessing when everything in you wants revenge and retribution for the evil done by another, when your impulse is to retaliate and your need is to be vindicated. At those times may you be blessed with a longer reach into the depths of your soul. May you find your vindication in the strength that is gained through your faithfulness to God's mercy and your "payback" in the peace that is known in forgiveness. May the God of Pardon bless you.

A Blessing for You from the God of Beginning Again

May the God of Beginning Again be with you. May that God hold you near as you grieve what is past and move with faith into what is to be. May the hand of God carry you across the darkness of loss into light. May your courage and your trust become for those around you a living witness to the mystery of death and rising. May the God of Beginning Again bless you.

A Blessing for You from the God of Justice

May God's spirit bless you when you see or experience injustice. May you be overtaken with a passion for truth as you guard and preserve your own integrity. May you stand up for those without voice, stand in for the victims of oppression and discrimination, and stand out in your persistence and desire for God's peace and justice in the world. May you live your life in pursuit of truth and in profound reverence for all of God's creation. May the God of Justice bless you always.

Blessings written by Maxine Shonk, OP from the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids:
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