

# Scripture Readings and Sermon

*September 6, 2020 by Rev. Mark Brechin*

## **Commentary on Matthew 18:1-7, 14-16, 19-20** (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

The lectionary jumps from the end of chapter 16 to 18:15. One reason is that 17:1-9, the Transfiguration, is traditionally read the Sunday before Lent. In addition to texts repeated in Luke and Mark, Matthew includes two sections predicting his death (17:11-13, 17:22-23) as well as an odd story about finding money in the mouth of a fish in order to pay the temple tax (17:24-27). For the purpose of this Sunday, the original lectionary reading 18:15-20 has been extended with two verses removed. Matthew's text about dealing with conflict within the congregation should be read within the context of stumbling blocks, the lost, and forgiveness (next week). The section begins with Jesus setting the tone by focusing on a child rather than on a person of power, "the greatest". This shift on children and by extension on family, puts an emphasis on healing the bonds of family and not breaking them. If someone is struggling, every effort should be made to remove stumbling blocks. If someone is lost, every effort should be made to find them. And if there is a disagreement, once again every effort should be made to heal the division and restore unity. It is only when we are gathered together in love that Jesus is found. Next week, the role forgiveness plays in this unity will be explored.

Matthew 18:20 "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

When has conflict interfered with your relationship with God?

Does it feel like worship when a church is divided?

Have you made every effort to reconcile or have you let the disagreement fester?

Is the disagreement as important as the loss of the relationship?

Has pride become a stumbling block that keeps the lost from being found?

## **Commentary on Exodus 12:1-14** (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

It is evident during the encounter between Moses and God at the burning bush that Moses is not a "yes" man. At one point (4:14) the anger of the LORD is even kindled against Moses. God, however, did not need a "yes" man because God knew that Moses would be going up against someone more hard headed and hardhearted than Moses - Pharaoh. The delivery from Egypt was not going to be easy for Pharaoh, the Israelites, and even Moses resisted at times. The LORD has to speak to Moses words of encouragement in Egypt to ensure that Moses and Aaron do not give up (7:1-9). The story of the birth of the Israelites from Egypt takes place only after a series of painful contractions or plagues recorded in chapters seven through eleven. The tenth plague described in chapter eleven is the death of the first born. In order to spare the Israelites from this devastating plague, God provides a way through so that death would "pass over". This plague will not only temporarily release Pharaoh's hold but it will unify a diverse group of people around a common meal and a shared experience. For generations afterwards of Jews and then Christians, this meal would bind members around the world to a common story of deliverance and salvation. While the understanding of the Lamb differs between the Jews and the Christians, the faith in the power of God to deliver is the same. Since the first month (12:2) occurs on the first new moon after the Spring Equinox, the start of the Jewish religious year can vary up to 28 days with an early Passover/Easter if the new moon is the day after the equinox and a late Passover/Easter if the new moon is the day before the equinox.

Exodus 12:14 "This day shall be a day of remembrance for you."

The word remember is rooted in the idea of re-membering or re-assembling that which has been scattered.

What events help to "remember" your family? Thanksgiving? Christmas?

Does this mean even more during times like the pandemic?  
Do you feel re-united with Jesus during Communion?  
What would make the "remembrance" more meaningful for you?

### **Commentary on Romans 13:8–14** (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

Following his argument to give vengeance to God (12:19), Paul begins chapter 13 by portraying human governments as instruments of God's justice. Paul is writing this as a privileged citizen of Rome during the Pax Romana (27 BC to 180 AD) which was a period of general prosperity and peace for the Roman Empire. Paul makes the assumption in 13:1-7 that the government seeks the good for the people and therefore all laws are just and good. History, however, has proven that human institutions are often corrupted by sin and laws can become instruments of evil rather than good. For this reason, the lectionary skips this section but it is important to understand that in verse 8 Paul is referring to human law. At this point, Paul begins to confuse the goodness of God's law with "goodness" in civil law as seen in his reference in verse 9. It is important to remember that Paul is not addressing the Jewish community at this point but the Gentile community which has a completely different view of law. Paul attributes living in the Spirit as living within societal law. For Paul, civil law is meant to control the gratification of the flesh. Paul argues to stay away from the civil disruption caused by "reveling and drunkenness ... debauchery and licentiousness ... quarreling and jealousy." Paul has recast Jesus not as a Jewish revolutionary but as an honorable citizen who's teachings emphasize the best of civil law. Jesus' message of love does not challenge Roman society but rather fulfills the law. One reason for Paul's alteration of Jesus' radical message of love of God above love of state may be found in verse 11-12, "salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near". Why fight Rome if Jesus' kingdom is returning soon? Be a Roman to the Romans in order to bring Romans to Jesus before his immanent return.

Romans 13:11 salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers

For Paul, this meant Jesus could return at any moment. 2,000 year later, what does this mean to you?

What is more important, civil obedience or God's will? When does love demand disobedience?

### **Sermon "Building the Kingdom"** (*Sermon Video*)

The scriptures this Sunday all deal with community. Paul focuses on love even when living within the laws of the community may seem difficult. The Passover story gives a glimpse at the birth of a community united by a common meal and a common event. And finally, Jesus looks at how we are to remain a community even during the difficult times of conflict. Given the polarized state of our nation as portrayed by the media, it is appropriate to be reminded that our ultimate community is the kingdom of God.

Leading up to Paul's statement about love fulfilling the law and following his statement about good overcoming evil, Paul addresses civil obedience. The call of Jesus to love neighbors as ourselves not only fulfilled civil law but encouraged honorable living which the Roman's valued especially in light of mob rule which Paul lists as gratification of the flesh. Underlying all of these laws, if they are to be good and just, is a deep love and respect for neighbor. Even when the laws fail to live up to this standard, Christians are called to a higher standard in Jesus Christ. It is only by putting on the armor of light that a society can find its way out of the darkness. Conflict often changes communities but there are always losers. When love and respect are at the center of change, then the entire community is

made better for the experience even during difficult times.

It is especially during difficult times that the tightest bonds of community are formed. The experience before Moses in Egypt varied widely between the descendants of Israel. Some did not descend into slavery but maintained a middle class existence that Joseph's privilege afforded them. After generations, a distant relative was all that truly united the people as evidenced by their bitter complaints in the wilderness. The plagues of Egypt, however, pushed them together and during the Passover forced them to share a meal together. Strangers gathered together to celebrate a distinctly non-Egyptian meal and became a people. Passover forged a new community that would remember and celebrate that meal through history and around the world. That same meal, reinterpreted by Jesus, would form a new community around his meal and his death. The God who once was a God of real estate and reproduction became the God who delivers and redeems. The Passover redeemed the people of Israel and Jesus' last supper redeemed humanity. God delivers us from the difficult times we live in and makes us once again a people of light.

This light is threatened, however, if we let the darkness of conflict place stumbling blocks before the children of God and force some children to become lost. When the disciples asked Jesus who was the greatest, they were planting the seeds of jealousy and conflict. Whenever a community begins to define itself not by what it stand for but rather by who is in or out, that community begins the long descent into darkness and discord. By remembering that we are all children of God and not parents in the faith, we are reminded who our Father is and the cost that was paid to rescue all the children. Therefore, if conflict arises which it will, Jesus tells us to work out our disagreements as family. If the family is being split apart, bring the entire family together to work out the problem and remember that the head of the family, Jesus, is there when all are gathered together. Be mindful that the family you are willing to split and the children you are driving out are the same people Jesus died for. As children of light bound by the one meal, the death, and the resurrection, we are called not to divide and cast out but to remove stumbling blocks and restore the lost. Let us all seek a better way of being community and building the kingdom.