

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
September 10, 2023 – The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-20
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

I'm sure that many of you recognized that our lesson from the Old Testament Book of Exodus is a description of the Jewish Passover. This passage about the preparation for the Lord's freeing of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt is also part of the instruction for the Israelites to keep the memory of this day of liberation as a perpetual feast, celebrated on the eve of the day of liberation, the 14th day of the month of Nisan. In the Hebrew calendar, still kept by the Jewish people for their religious observances, every month begins with a new moon. The 14th day, therefore, is the full moon, and it is in the night of the full moon, at midnight, that the Lord comes through the land of Egypt to strike the Egyptians, but passes over the houses of the Israelites.

Jews have kept this festival for more than 3,000 years. Jesus and his followers observed it, on the night before Jesus' death on the cross. Our Easter celebration is determined by the moon's phases because, along with other Christian holy days linked to Easter, it follows the pattern set in Jewish religious observance.

This celebration of Passover, joyous as it is for the Jewish people, and significant for others as a reminder that God is the God of liberation from slavery, still has elements that people in the modern world may find troubling, that we may find troubling. The Jewish people have found them troubling, as well, especially the killing of so many Egyptians. There is a rabbinic story about the heavenly beings in God's presence. They hear Moses and the Israelites sing this song when the waves of the sea close over the Egyptian army that has been pursuing them as they make their way out of Egypt: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously! Pharaoh's chariots and his host he has cast into the sea!" (Exodus 15:1). When the heavenly beings join in with this song, God rebukes them, saying: "My children are drowning, and you would sing?"

The story we heard this morning offers a symbolic account of God, the Lord, defeating Egypt by conquering its gods, who are supposed to keep the people and their agriculture safe, and particularly showing God humbling Pharaoh, since injury to the people of a land is regarded as injury to the ruler of the land. The story is not meant to celebrate cruelty, or wholesale death, but rather to illustrate God's acts to rescue the oppressed and humble the oppressors.

Before we consider our lesson from the Gospel of Matthew, I would like to say a word about an image we find in St. Paul's Letter to the church in Rome. "Lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:12). The image of an "armor of light" has two aspects. The first is a counter to the darkness of sinful works since light overcomes darkness. The second is an aspect of armor itself: it is a defensive, not an offensive, weapon. It protects the one who wears the armor. Light-filled armor would send out light and so also be a sign of protection – like the blood on

the doorposts of the Israelite homes before the Lord's liberating passage through the land of Egypt, the protection for the Israelites and against the Egyptians.

In Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, he expands the image of "the whole armor of God" (Ephesians 6:11-17). I think his words are well worth hearing: "Fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

Now to our reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Three weeks ago I spoke about this passage. I heard from several people who told me that what I said was helpful to them regarding church and the world outside church, so I will repeat myself a bit today.

It is clear from the first sentence of the lesson we heard today – "if another member of the church sins against you" – that Jesus recognized the fact that members of the church do "sin against" one another. He was not blind to this fact, and he didn't advocate ignoring the fact. We may think of the well-publicized scandals in the church where sexual abuse of minors by clergy has been hidden by church authorities and the terrible damage that was thereby done to the victims as well as to the whole church. We have seen proof that it is not good to pretend that all is well when all is not well. Jesus gives his followers guidance about how to address problems, not hide them.

During my years in parish ministry, I have tried to address conflict within the church using Jesus' teaching as my guide. The results have been mixed. At times, when the problems have been between me and one parishioner, I have requested a face-to-face meeting so that I could discover the cause of the problem. Most often, after hearing the person's concerns, issues were clarified and goodwill was restored, at least for a time. When this has not been successful, I have sometimes asked to meet with the person and one or two other church members of their choosing, on occasion with the entire vestry, with the goal of greater understanding and reconciliation, if possible. Again, this has sometimes been successful, at least for a time. There have also been occasions when mutual understanding has been impossible to reach, despite all efforts, and people have left the parish to join another church community.

It is always painful when efforts toward peace made in good faith fail, in the church and outside of the church. But the fact is that this sometimes happens. It is also a fact that people do not always work with one another in good faith or with goodwill even in the church where we might expect people to be people of goodwill. It is a shame – and I mean that literally – when church people fail to treat one another with goodwill. It is a shame and a scandal to those outside the church. But it is the reality we live with. The church is not, after all, the Kingdom of God. We must, with courage, live as faithfully as we can, trusting in the ultimate triumph of God's goodness and love.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.