

Sunday, September 6, 2020
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 18 (Year A)

Exodus 12.1-14; Romans 13.8-14; Matthew 18.15-20

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/345121723339104>

(Sermon begins at about 12:00)

“Connectedness”

This past week I watched a panel discussion entitled “Policing and a Just Society,” produced by Washington National Cathedral. One of the speakers was Sharon Pratt, Mayor of Washington, D.C. from 1991 to 1995—the first African American woman to hold that position. Actually, the first African American woman to serve as mayor of any major American city. Mayor Pratt is an Episcopalian and a member of the Cathedral congregation. In response to a question about the role of the church in our current social conversation about issues of racial injustice, Mayor Pratt gave voice to something I had been thinking and feeling for the last few months—ever since the murder of George Floyd in May. She said, “You almost have to believe, as horrible as this virus is, it’s almost like the Lord is at work to get our attention.” And while her comment captured my attention, as I said, giving voice to some of my own thoughts, what particularly grabbed me was the lead-in. She said, “With one pathogen . . . suddenly we all recognized we were interconnected . . . what else could have done that?”¹ It is the concept of interconnectedness that spoke to me in Mayor Pratt’s comments. And one that undergirds all our readings for today. Readings in which God is trying to get our attention about what it means to be connected to God and one another.

In a way, the story of the first Passover in our reading from Exodus is the establishment of connectedness among the Hebrew people. Now, of course, they are already connected by blood. They are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; descended from the twelve sons of Jacob who went down into Egypt some four or five hundred years before to escape a terrible famine in their own land of Canaan. Those who have become the Twelve Tribes of Israel. They are the ones who are connected not just by blood, but by a common faith in the one true God: the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.

But in today’s reading, we see the Hebrew people coming together in a way they never really have before. For the first time, they are brought together in a sacramental way. One outward sign being the painting of lintels with lamb’s blood so the Lord will pass over and spare his Chosen People in a devastating judgment against the land of Egypt. Another outward sign being the meal prepared and eaten in a specific way, as the people prepare for what comes next. They are told, “This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly” (Ex 12.11). “Loins girded” being an idiom for preparing oneself for action. The sandals and staff being an indication that they are dressed for travel. The meal eaten hurriedly, so they can get on the road, to begin their exodus out of Egypt and their journey back to the Promised Land. A meal that binds the people together as they prepare for their journey. A meal that continues to be celebrated annually by the Jewish people, commemorating one of the most important events in their faith. A ritual meal that,

from its establishment, signifies the internal grace of being God's Chosen. The internal grace of the people being connected, not just by blood, but also by their common faith, and by their common wilderness experience, which served to solidify their relationship with God, their connectedness, and their identity as a people.

Because of the centrality of the Passover event in their collective identity, this story of its establishment is really the iconic image of the connectedness of the Jewish people—connectedness with God and with each other. And as our ancestors in the faith, this is also one of our iconic images of connectedness, with God and with each other.

The importance of connectedness among Christians is spelled out in our reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans. In this passage, Paul talks about Christian love. Specifically, that loving one another is the hallmark of Christian love. As Paul writes, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13.10). Love, in this context, is not a feeling, but is rather a concrete good that is the fulfilling of the law. That all the other laws are ultimately based on this one law to love one's neighbor. In other words, if you love others, all the other laws automatically take care of themselves. Love of others is the foundation of all the other laws. Love of others is the foundation of Christian living. That being the case, connectedness is an inherent part of who we are.

This is reflected in some of the language that we use to describe ourselves. That we are members of the Body of Christ. We are connected to that universal body, comprised of all other Christians. Just as I cannot deny that my arm is connected to my body, I cannot deny that I am connected to the Body of Christ. I cannot deny that you are connected to the Body of Christ. I cannot deny that we are inherently connected by our shared faith and our commitment to love one another.

Our reading from the Gospel according to Matthew demonstrates a particular application of this connectedness that we share as followers of Christ. Here, Jesus is specifically teaching about reconciliation between members of the Body of Christ. He recognizes that, despite the commandment to love one another, we are still human and that disagreement, even conflict, can arise. But it is precisely because of our connectedness and the importance of the commandment to love one another that we cannot allow disagreement or conflict to destroy our connectedness. So, in our Gospel reading, Jesus lays out a procedure for reconciliation, for maintaining or reestablishing connectedness.

While Jesus specifically identifies is a process for seeking reconciliation, the overarching principles apply to all aspects of communal life. They provide a model for dealing with whatever issues arise in the life of the community. In short, Jesus is providing a model for maintaining connectedness through communications. It may seem obvious that communication is necessary to maintaining connectedness, but in actual practice, good communications does not always occur. One party assumes the other will just know. Someone assumes someone else will convey the necessary information to those who need it. Someone takes it upon themselves to do something, not thinking that their actions may impact the larger community. You get the idea. Bottom line is that communications are important—communications are vital—to maintaining connectedness of the community.

But our connectedness extends beyond the four walls of our parish. Or right now, beyond the walls of our virtual parish community. Which actually, is more expansive than the four walls of our physical space. Demonstrating that our connectedness extends beyond our parish community into the broader community. Maybe God is using this time of crisis to emphasize our connectedness—even if it is a connectedness that we had not previously recognized or maybe even have forgotten. Maybe God is using this time of crisis to present us with opportunities to expand that connectedness.

After all, in recent years we have seen so much emphasis on that which divides us. The wealthiest one percent vs. the rest of us. Democrats vs. Republicans. Liberal vs. conservative. Male vs. female. Young vs. old. Straight vs. LGBTQ. Christian vs. non-Christian. White vs. persons of color. So much so that we have tended not to—that we have failed to—recognize and celebrate that which connects us: our common humanity. The fact that we are all beloved children of God. The fact that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. Perhaps it is time to put the divisions aside and rediscover, to reaffirm, our connectedness. Particularly in a time of global pandemic when it is more obvious than ever that we are all in this together.

One thing that is interesting to note is the similarities between our own time and that of the first Passover in the book of Exodus. The first Passover and the start of the exodus out of Egypt began during a time of plague in Egypt. When God sent a series of plagues upon the people, with the death of the firstborn being the last of the ten plagues. The plague from which the Hebrews would be saved because of the blood on the lintels. So, too, are we in a time of plague. Not of the same sort as those in Egypt, but you have to admit a pandemic is pretty plague-like. And it was because of this tenth plague that the Hebrew people came together in the ritual of the Passover, where they were connected in a new way, to begin a new way of being. For them, it was leaving behind Egypt and the things of the past and traveling into the wilderness, into the unknown, where they would seek a new way of being. A new way of being God's people. So, too, are we, in the midst of this current plague, being given an opportunity to seek a new way of being. An opportunity to explore new ways of being. New ways of being connected. New ways of being church. New ways of being the Body of Christ in the world. New ways of offering hope to the world.

I think this is what Mayor Pratt was getting at when she said, "You almost have to believe, as horrible as this virus is, it's almost like the Lord is at work to get our attention." Did God somehow engineer all of this—the coronavirus coinciding with the social unrest over another plague, that of systemic racism? I don't think God works that way. But I do think God uses the circumstances we find ourselves in to provide us with opportunities for education and growth. That God is using the one plague—the coronavirus pandemic—and the necessity for reexamining how we function and how we remain connected during this time as an opportunity to explore new ways of being that just might help us address the other plague—racial injustice. That while we have time on our hands because of so much being shut down, we can explore new ways of connectedness that might help in rectifying centuries of injustice.

A number of you have been participating in the Deanery 8 My Work To Do program, where we explore some of the issues of racial injustice and our own part in those injustices and how those

of us who are white benefit from those injustices. Some of you have joined other study groups exploring the book *White Fragility* and other resources. Some of you have expressed interest in doing additional work on exploring the issue of racial injustice and systemic racism. These are all good beginning steps. But they are just that. Beginning steps. So much more needs to be done. And we as the church have a unique role to play in that work. We are a safe space where the difficult conversations can be had, knowing that even if we do not see eye-to-eye, we still love each other. That we are still connected.

As we take this opportunity to maintain and strengthen our own connectedness, let us also go the additional step of figuring out how we can extend that connectedness beyond our walls—be they literal or virtual—and be a place and a people that builds systems of connectedness that model a new way of being. A way of being that is energizing, that is life-giving, that is founded upon and that lifts up the Biblical truths we profess.

¹ “Policing and a Just Society: Paths Forward, Washington National Cathedral, published on August 20, 2020, YouTube video, 1:18:45, <https://youtu.be/eAQTwDUM0v0>.