

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2020

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Give praise to God!

All: How merciful is the God of our ancestors!

One: We have gathered to sing praise to our Deliverer.

All: We are here to be claimed again by our God.

We have assembled to express our gratitude.

One: Praise the Lord, for it is God who saves; it is God who forgives; it is God who delivers.

All: We give thanks and praise to the Lord!

***OPENING HYMN “When Israel Was in Egypt’s Land” GtG 52**

One: When Israel was in Egypt’s land,

All: let my people go;

One: oppressed so hard they could not stand,

All: let my people go!

One: Go down, Moses,
way down in Egypt’s land;
tell old Pharaoh:

All: let my people go!

One: “Thus saith the Lord,” bold Moses said,

All: “Let my people go!

One: If not, I’ll smite your first-born dead.

All: Let my people go!”

One: “No more shall they in bondage toil:

All: let my people go!

One: Let them come out with Egypt’s spoil:

All: let my people go!”

One: O let us all from bondage flee;

All: let my people go!

One: And let us all in Christ be free:

All: let my people go!

One: Go down, Moses,
way down in Egypt's land;
tell old Pharaoh:

All: let my people go!

(Public Domain)

***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Gracious God,

**we confess that we have been ungrateful and insensitive,
cutting ourselves off from you and from other people.**

We do not see our own iniquity.

We do not sense any wickedness in our own ways.

We seek to measure life by our own standards, not yours.

We do not recognize our own lies

or the oppression we inflict on people by whose labors we benefit.

Forgive us yet again, gracious God.

**Touch our hearts and awaken our consciences,
that we may receive pardon and new life. Amen.**

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: The abundance of God's steadfast love is always available to those ready to receive it.

All: The God of covenant claims us as beloved children, redeemed and forgiven.

One: People of God, God is merciful and gracious, and our sins are forgiven.

**All: Reconciled to the God who loves us,
let us live and love through Christ our Lord.**

***THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: And also with you.

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READINGS Exodus 12:1-14
Exodus 14:19-31

EXODUS 12:1-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹ *The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ² This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³ Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴ If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵ Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶ You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷ They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸ They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹ Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰ You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹ 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. It is the passover of the LORD. ¹² For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.*

¹⁴ *This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.*

EXODUS 14:19-31 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹⁹ *The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. ²⁰ It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.*

²¹ *Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. ²² The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴ At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. ²⁵ God clogged their chariot wheels so that they*

turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

²⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." ²⁷ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹ But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

³⁰ Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in the Lord's servant Moses.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON by Pastor Bill Vincent

It was the foundational experience of God's people, the Israelites. The seminal event: life-altering, faith shaping.

The experience of the Israelites, enslaved and then freed by a process and power not their own.

This experience of the Exodus has impacted countless others in their struggle for freedom, and their understanding of their fight, and right, for freedom.

Later on, when the people were allowed to return home from their Babylonian Exile, this was seen and understood as another, new 'exodus'.

The history of African Americans in this country, with the long, and continuing, struggle for true freedom, is echoed in the words of the spiritual we used just this morning:

When Israel was in Egypt's land...

Let my people go.

The escape from Egypt; the crossing of the Red Sea.

The defeat of the Egyptians; the freedom of the Israelites.

The work of God; the will of God.

Freedom is God's intent for all God's children.

But one thing to note: freedom has a terrible cost.

Yes, most obviously, there is the back-breaking work, the degradation of an entire population of people, the stripes of the whips on their bodies.

But note also, the death of the first-born of Egypt, the destruction of the entire Egyptian army.

Freedom -- or, more properly, the denial of freedom -- has a terrible cost, for both those oppressed and those doing the oppressing.

Now, when I say that, let me be clear: this is NOT to turn our attention away from the horrendous injury and evil done to those who are oppressed, whether in Egypt or elsewhere. This is not to say, "Poor, poor oppressors!" - No!

But let us also acknowledge that there is a cost, often unrecognized, for those who do the oppressing. For, those who deny others their basic humanity and dignity -- they are diminished as well. For if I cannot perceive the image of God in another, then I will have a hard time seeing -- aright -- the image of God in me.

And so the Israelites' freedom comes at a terrible cost: death of the first-born of Egypt; death of the entire Egyptian army.

Such is the case when those with power want to hold on to their power at all cost.

Such is the case when one's heart is hardened to the cries of the oppressed and the plight of the poor and the misery of the marginalized.

The story of the death of the first-born, the picture of dead Egyptians on the seashore, are powerful images that remind us that the devaluation of the Israelites as slaves diminished the humanity of all involved, including their oppressors (the Egyptians). For if I deny the full humanity of another human being, I deny it for myself as well.

And so, it seems, the first step in the march toward freedom is a step of the heart. It takes recognizing the denial of rights, to set me in the right direction. It takes the awareness of systemic injustice, to recognize the direction to work for justice. It takes the insight of the precious image of God within me to affirm the equally precious image of God in you.

And so, earlier this year, the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy issued a formal apology, and confession, for the church's participation in and perpetuation of racial injustice, in its history, in this area.

That's why the 21-Day Challenge our churches have engaged has been so meaningful, at least for me (and, I suspect, for others). By hearing different voices and seeing different perspectives, I have gained a deeper awareness of the history of slavery in this country, beyond the passing of the 13th Amendment, and continuing to this day. And I have to confess my complicity and my contribution to this burden, and to this cost.

And so, the first step toward freedom is a step of the heart.

But the march to freedom does not stop there.

For the second -- additional -- step toward freedom involves aligning myself with God's 'already' work.

It is one of the great insights I have gained over the years from our denomination's Book of Order -- that's right, I said an insight from the Book of Order (didn't expect that one, did you?).

Talking about the Ministry of Members:

A faithful member bears witness to God's love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's Church. Such involvement includes:

...

responding to God's activity in the world through service to others,
...
working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment,
...

(Book of Order, G-1.0304; Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.))

“Responding to God’s activity in the world.”

God is still at work in the world. And God is at work in movements toward freedom and affirmation of all human life and the value and dignity of each and every precious child of God, regardless of color of skin or position of economic progress.

God is still at work. And though I may not have been called to be the next ‘Moses’, I hope I have -- and you have too -- heard the call to align myself with God’s work for freedom and justice.

And at the very least -- at the *very least* -- that means heeding Gamaliel’s words.

You remember the story of Gamaliel? Gamaliel was on the council in Jerusalem when several of the apostles are brought before the council and told to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. The apostles say they will continue to preach in the name of the Jesus, and the council gets angry and wants to kill the apostles. At this point, Gamaliel says, let’s send them out and let me talk with you for a moment. He reminds the council of some others who thought they were ‘big stuff’ whose following eventually melted away. And then he says,

“So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” (Acts 4:38-39)

To heed the call to align with God’s work, including God’s work for freedom and justice, at the very least means not standing in God’s way: do not resist God’s work by speaking ill of those who are doing God’s work; do not stand in God’s way by working against what God is working for through others; do not go against God’s will by advocating hatred and fear and the devaluing of another child of God.

But hopefully, to hear the call to align ourselves with God’s work, will mean we discern a place to stand up and speak out, for we need to speak up; a place to support and work alongside, because we need to do that too.

It is time to hear and lift up the woes of those who go without food on the table because they do not have a decent job to provide for their families; it is time to hear and lift up the woes those who are cast aside by the rest of society and left to rot; it is time to hear and lift up the woes of those who have borne the undue burden of society and its success; time to work for the alleviation, the comfort, and the cure of those woes. And to be a part of that work.

And part of this work -- part of *my* work -- is to be open to God’s exodus for me from fear and despair and hopelessness.

For the world can be a scary place, and the work for justice can be an intimidating endeavor. The task can seem so huge -- ‘What can I do?’ The powers in opposition to equality for all are so entrenched -- ‘What’s the use?’

Fear, despair, hopelessness are all too easy a response to the task and life ahead.

For these things (fear, despair, hopelessness) will, more than anything else, lead us to resist God's own work and mis-hear God's call, and cause us to freeze into inaction and curl in upon ourselves.

When we are called to join in God's work and discern God's call, and to take action by reaching out to others.

But when we reach that point -- the point when we feel on the edge of despair, in the throes of hopelessness, gripped by fear -- let us remember this: freedom is always God's work.

The deliverance of the Israelites was God's work -- not the Israelites' work, not Moses' doing -- but God's. And the people

saw the great work that the LORD did ... and believed....

Exodus is always God's doing. To affirm that is to lift the weight of the world off my shoulders.

Exodus (freedom) is always God's doing. But also, always in concert with human agency -- you and me.

So we cannot simply sit on the sidelines and do nothing.

When God calls, we answer -- like Moses did, initially; like Isaiah, like Mary -- "Here I am!"

And when God says, "I'm sending you," we say, "Your will be done...even through me."

Because we know indeed it is God's will being done. And so it is God's power at work in us to see the work through to the end. It is God's hope sustaining us through the darkness to the light on the other side. It is God's encouragement leading us through the chaotic storms to the promised land and life.

For, it is "*For freedom Christ has set us free*" (Galatians 5:1a).

For, in the ultimate exodus, Christ has freed us from the slavery of sin and trying to win our way into God's good graces. And Christ has freed us to the embrace of God's love and the embodiment of God's love in service to our neighbor, near and far, no matter the cost.

God will have freedom for God's children, even at the cost of God's own Son.

This same Son who calls us to lose our life -- in devotion to God and in service to others -
- in order to save our life.

The question is, Which side of the freedom equation will we choose?

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.**

**With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

(from A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: God in your mercy...
People: ...hear our prayer.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (*Contemporary Version*)

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Thank you, God, for guiding us through life.
You have blessed us far beyond our deserving.
We are grateful for all we have learned
when we dared to trust you in difficult times.
Use these experiences to your glory.
Use our offerings to prosper your mission among us and beyond us.
Use our lives to communicate your love and justice
to all who long for the fullness of life you intend. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** "The Church of Christ in Every Age" GtG 320

One: The church of Christ in every age,
beset by change but Spirit-led,
must claim and test its heritage
and keep on rising from the dead.

All: Across the world, across the street,
the victims of injustice cry
for shelter and for bread to eat,
and never live before they die.

One: Then let the servant church arise,
**All: a caring church that longs to be
a partner in Christ's sacrifice,
and clothed in Christ's humanity.**

One: For Christ alone, whose blood was shed,
can cure the fever in our blood,
**All: and teach us how to share our bread
and feed the starving multitude.**

One: We have no mission but to serve
in full obedience to our Lord:
**All: to care for all, without reserve,
and spread Christ's liberating word.**

Used by permission through CCLI License #11178434.

***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: Walk in the strength and confidence that God guides your feet.
God's Spirit goes with you to teach and lead.

**All: We will remember the abundance of God's love.
We will share the heritage we have received.**

One: Live with gladness in God's richest blessings.
Live with generosity for the sake of all people.

**All: We will live for God,
showing mercy and
loving one another.**

One: May the God who protects and defends
keep you in safety, mercy, and love.
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
And let the gathered people of God say...

People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

The Call to Worship, Assurance of Pardon, Prayer for Illumination, Prayers of the People (adapted), and Charge and Blessing are reprinted by permission of Westminster John Knox Press from *Feasting on the Word® Worship Companion*. Copyright 2014.

The Call to Worship, Prayer of Confession, Assurance of Pardon, Prayer of Dedication, and Charge are reprinted, with permission, from *Fresh Winds of the Spirit, Book 2* by Lavon Bayler. Copyright 1992 by The Pilgrim Press.