

Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35
16th Sunday after Pentecost A; 09.17.23; G. Miles Smith+

The readings today put on display something that we often experience about the Bible. There is a dramatic difference between what the Old Testament talks about...and the New Testament—so much so that it can be hard for us to know how to hold them together. And so much so that there can easily be a tendency to turn away from the Old Testament.

[One of the surprising things to realize, however, is that for a long time, the early Christian's scripture was *only* the Old Testament--because that was all that they had--until the letters of Paul began to circulate and then later the gospel books. So, the early Christians did not experience an alienation from the Old Testament like we might. They continued to pour over the Old Testament to understand how their experience of Jesus Christ fit into the purposes of God. But we are more likely to want to just skip the Old Testament. And we probably would most of the time, if it wasn't for the fact that we are a liturgical church that lives in obedience to assigned readings every Sunday called the "lectionary" which compel us to listen to the Old Testament whether we like it or not.]

Today is a good example of just how different the Old and New Testaments can be from each other. Exodus tells one of the most famous stories in the Old Testament of the Hebrew slaves' amazing deliverance from a pursuing Egyptian army which is subsequently wiped out. And the Psalm echoes that story. But then Paul's letter to the Romans is about the challenge of keeping a Christian community together in Rome when the members there are so different from each other. And in the Gospel, Jesus tells a rather shocking story about the challenge of seeking to be a forgiving person within Christian community.

The Old Testament's storytelling is mostly—with some exceptions--about the conflict between tribes and kingdoms, who fight and kill, over land, power, and religion...and the perspective of a Hebrew people very slowly evolving in their understanding of God in the midst of all that.

[And the idea of revenge is very common. In fact, it isn't unusual that when we read the Psalm some Sundays that it will end up putting a prayer for revenge upon our lips without our quite realizing what we are saying. That then raises a question that Christians have disagreed over at different times—does the Old Testament *authorize* us to seek vengeance...or is it *mirroring* to us our continuing inclination for vengeance so that we might be able to choose something better? It sounds to me like Jesus is saying the latter, but Christians still disagree over this.]

So, for the most part—again with some exceptions—to read the Old Testament is to read an “us” against “them” story, with a dizzying array of names of tribes and kingdoms and places. It is much like reading the news—except of course without angels and “pillars of cloud”. The Old Testament mirrors back to us many of the same fundamental human problems that we face.

The New Testament is still situated within a geopolitical context of conflict and power within the vast Roman Empire and yet within that difficult setting, there are these little spiritual communities springing up under the experience of Christ that nobody would have expected to even be possible. So, in the Epistle reading from Paul's letter to the Romans it can initially sound like Paul is just addressing some highly particular issue from the ancient past regarding disagreements in the Roman church about certain foods and certain religious holidays that has nothing to do with us. But when we realize that the Roman church—like all the early churches—was a wild combination of all kinds of people that wouldn't ordinarily be in the same room together, much less be worshipping together, then it starts to get real. These were people from different religions, philosophies, worldviews, cultures, and ethnicities having one thing only in common—some kind of call upon their lives from Jesus Christ. *Such a gathering of such different people would have been unimaginable in the Old Testament.*

And it is actually becoming more and more unimaginable within a lot of Christian communities of today. Christians today are often dividing themselves off from others that don't have the same cultural and political views...and even seeking purified congregations and denominations of some single view. But, it seems to me, that when Church does that, it becomes more like the Old Testament than the New. But it is a tempting option, isn't it? It is always a tempting option to divide ourselves off from others—and we get a lot of pressure to do that.

And the Church throughout history has tended to do just that and have our own forms of tribal conflict. The Episcopal Church has sometimes participated in that kind of conflict too, just like many denominations these days, even when our denomination has aspired to be welcoming of all. And Grace Church has in the past sometimes split itself off from others in our community. And we are still seen, by others who do not know us, that we are strictly white and wealthy, and so they will automatically exclude themselves from us without giving us a chance. We know that there is some truth to these assumptions, but we also know that our fellowship is more complicated than that.

We actually are a people with different life experiences, different religious perspectives, different worldviews, politics, and income levels. *And I think of how often it is true that you, the people of Grace, can be like our namesake: graceful.*

And that it is possible here--when it isn't so possible in other congregations--that our different life experiences can be enriching of our friendships with each other--rather than being viewed as a problem. And, similar to the early Roman church, our different religious perspectives, world views, and politics *can be held safe, as a matter of conscience, in a spiritual community here*, without disrupting our communion in Christ. In fact, it is our communion in Christ that makes it possible to be like that, even when we don't realize it.

So in some sense, our Christian mission here is actually quite simple: To keep gathering and living into our namesake:

*a Grace Church
called by a gracious Christ
to be a gracious people
for all kinds of people of Keswick.*

That is something we actually already know how to do.

It is just that the time has come for us to be *the gracious people of Grace*...more intentionally...and in some new ways...in these years to come.