

Joining Households Together

October 4th, 2020

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Declare this message to the entire community of Israel: "When the tenth day of this month arrives, every family is to select a lamb, one for each household. If there aren't enough people in the family to eat an entire lamb, then they should share a lamb with their nearest neighbor according to how many people are in the neighbor's family. Divide the portions of the lamb so that each person has enough to eat." [Exodus 12:3-4]

You are to explain to your children on that day, "We observe this feast because of what the Eternal did for me when I came out of Egypt." [Exodus 13:8]

This morning I will begin by sharing a theological reflection, about our passage from Exodus, from Jacqueline Lapsley, Associate Professor of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. She says:

Many volumes have been written on the Passover account in Exodus. It is noteworthy how the ethics, widely pervasive in the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, are also found here: if a family cannot afford to provide a lamb for the Passover, it is the

responsibility of a better-off neighboring family to share what they have. The idea that "households join together" and that the lamb shall be divided proportionally to the number of persons present reflects the deep biblical conviction that the good of the community as a whole must and should be intentionally cultivated. The emphasis in the Bible is ON the responsibilities of members to the community's welfare, not, in general, on the rights of particular individuals.

In accordance with the Exodus narrative, in which the people are fleeing from the forces of Pharaoh, the people are to eat what they can that night and not have any leftovers. Whatever is left the next morning must be burned. Ellen Davis has argued that Egypt's economy is based on hierarchical oppression in which an abundance of food is produced on the backs of the poor but is enjoyed almost exclusively by the very rich.

By contrast the economy of the wilderness (here inaugurated at the Exodus) teaches Israel to trust in God as deliverer and

provider of food. They must leave hoarding and scarcity behind, both as a practice and as a mentality, if they are to embrace faith in this God who delivers them.

One of the most important elements in the story occurs in Exodus 13:8: "You shall tell your child on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.'" Telling the story in every generation -- that God delivers those who suffer from oppression, that God works for the flourishing of the world -- is a central task for those who trust in God. The Bible itself puts forth the idea that the testimony of those who have experienced the benefits of God's saving power is vital and necessary for God's work in the world to go forward. If we do not tell God's story, other stories will rush in to fill the vacuum, and many of those stories do not lead to flourishing.

Abundance. Sharing. Trust. Those are the main themes that our passage from Exodus is encouraging us to reflect on this morning.

The fact that God needed to remind – even command – people to

share, during a frightening time, during a time of unrest and unknown, reminds me of just how similar all we human beings are. In our country, which praises and even worships ultra-independence, we too need to be reminded – even commanded, by God – to share.

But this passage is about far more than just sharing. And it's certainly about more than our cultural version of sharing; knowing that we're going to get something back – like a tax rebate, or even a “thank you.” When we share, with the expectation that we are going to get something back, we aren't sharing we're practicing the barter system. When we give something, expecting something in return, we're living out of the mentality of scarcity rather than the mentality of abundance.

When we can give without expecting anything in return, we are living in the trust that God provides abundantly and will continue to provide for our needs and for the needs of everyone. During that first Passover meal everyone received the exact amount of lamb that their bodies needed to nourish and sustain them. Then, the next morning,

all of the leftovers were burned. Why? To continue to rewire the human mentality into a place of trusting in God, of living in the faith that God would provide all that everyone would need.

It also moved the mentality from individualism to community. It's as Professor Lapsley explained, "that the good of the community as a whole must and should be intentionally cultivated. The emphasis in the Bible is on the responsibilities of members of a community to the community's welfare, not, in general, on the rights [or desires] of particular individuals."

This is a biblical ethic. It is God's ethic. To be perfectly blunt, it's the opposite of the American ethic, which preaches ultra-independence. In America, if the community falls apart or dies, that's fine. So long as each individual is allowed to gather and hoard as much as they want. The American ethic bears a frightening resemblance to the ancient Egyptian economy that was based on hierarchical oppression, in which an abundance of food is produced on the backs of the impoverished but is enjoyed almost exclusively by the very rich.

To have faith in a God Who Is Still Speaking, means making the health of every person within a community – AS a community – the central focus. It means passing on what you have in abundance, so that the people in the households around you have enough. But we're not just talking about food or money. It's also about balance and equality in all resources and representation.

As I see it, it is the role of the wider church in THIS decade, between now and 2030, to make a hard turn towards the biblical ethic, leading those around us to do the same. What the biblical ethic boils down to is balance in community. Sharing, without expecting anything in return, until everyone has exactly what each person needs. Getting rid of excess, so that we aren't tempted to hoard it, and go back to ultra-independence – turning away from trusting in God – again.

I believe it is possible. I believe the stories that it has happened before. I have faith that it can happen again. I trust that God will break through our ultra-independence so that we can be reborn in community. Amen.