

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

ACNA Readings – Ezekiel 33:1-11; Psalm 119:33-48; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 18:15-20

Introduction. Ever since the beginning, God has always delighted to share his time and his creation with Man. God planted the Garden and asked Adam to tend it. God – the king of the universe – rules over the world and yet asked Adam to take dominion over the earth. God is the light of the world and yet he tasked Israel to be a light to the nations. Throughout sacred history, there has always been a partnership between heaven and earth.

Common Theme. Many of our readings today reflect on various aspects of that partnership that the Lord requires of us. Moses will require the Israelites to participate in the redemption of Passover by applying the blood of the lamb, the Epistles will describe our response to the goodness of God, and Jesus will teach us of our obligation to each other in the household of faith.

Exodus 12:1-14. Our reading from Exodus describes the instructions for the Passover, the tenth and final plague against the land of Egypt. Unlike the previous plagues, this last plague is not going to take the form of a natural disaster. Instead, it's going to be a direct and personal action of God against all the inhabitants of Egypt.

This plague – which will involve the death of the firstborn – is the only plague to require the participation of the Israelites. From now on Israel will be an active participant in the redemptive activity of God. The entire community is engaged in the ritual of taking a lamb into the house and then slaughtering and eating it in a prescribed manner. The first Passover was deeply personal, there was no priestly class to perform the service for them. There is no temple, no liturgy, and no prayers are prescribed to be said; the sacrifice is not for sin. The function of the Passover lamb is to defeat death by keeping the Angel of Death away from the family dwelling.

Moses begins the Passover instructions by first marking time. Time is very special to the Lord. Time is the first thing called holy in the Scriptures (Gen 2:3). Moses announces that the month of Aviv is to be the first month of the sacred calendar of the Jewish people. *Aviv* is the Hebrew word for *spring* and so biblically the beginning of the year occurred in the spring. During the Babylonian exile, the calendar was modified into a dual religious and social calendar. The beginning of the year in the social calendar – called *Rosh HaShanah* or *head of the year* – was moved to the fall, and the Hebrew calendrical months took on the names of Babylonian deities, which is the case to this day.

The *lamb* – called a *seh* in Hebrew – could refer to either a young animal from either the sheep or the goats. The lamb is for a household and is not an individual sacrifice; this means it could be shared with the neighbours if they could not acquire their own lamb. The lamb – like all sacrifices to God – was to be without a blemish as the Lord deserves only our best. *God should not receive our second best!* The only other instructions include the method of cooking and the style of eating the meal – in haste in a position of readiness with unleavened bread.

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Later traditions were added to the Passover festival, some of these appearing in the Gospels. These included the 4 cups of wine, various prayers, blessings and songs, and the action of reclining at the table as opposed to eating in haste. Jesus is not opposed to tradition. He does not comment negatively on the addition of wine into the Passover story as wine is not mentioned in the actual text of Exodus. Rather, he uses the wine to explain himself in a very powerful way. Jesus also makes no mention of the lamb at Passover in any of the Gospels, but in its place uses the unleavened bread to describe his body as a broken sacrifice.¹

The Israelite participation includes not only consuming the lamb but importantly placing some of the blood of the animal around the entrances of their dwellings. Only obediently placing the blood on the doorposts would cause the Lord to pass over the house. Believing that the blood would protect you was not sufficient, you had to actually put it in place. Anyone inside the dwelling would be saved.

Knowing this, there is a Jewish tradition that says the Israelites invited as many people as they could to come into their homes and under the protection of the blood – even Egyptians. Those Egyptians who did so awoke in the morning to find that their sons had also been spared the death of the firstborn. They realized that even though they had been cruel to the Israelites, the Hebrews had responded in love. When Israel departed from Egypt, the Scriptures tell us that a mixed multitude of non-Jews joined them, possibly due to the mercy and grace shown to them by the Israelites.

Finally, Moses declares that the Passover is not a one-time event, but instead is to become part of the sacred calendar of Israel and celebrated as a lasting ordinance. Interestingly Jesus himself says that he has, eagerly desired to eat this Passover and will not eat of it again until it finds its fulfilment in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:15-16). Time is very special to God and this saying of Jesus implies that Passover continues to be celebrated in the world to come. *Other festivals also appear to be celebrated following the advent of the Messiah, such as Sukkot – or Tabernacles – as prophesied by Zechariah 14:16-17.*

Psalm 149. This psalm has no title or attribution and simply begins and ends with the imperative *Hallelujah* or *Praise the Lord!* It is a song of total praise and adoration. There is no mention of trouble, local strife, or tension in the words of the psalm. Despite that the history of Israel is replete with failure, idolatry, and sin, verse four powerfully declares that the Lord takes pleasure in his people. This is a humbling reality for the worshipper to pray and acknowledge. This is not to say that the Lord ignores sin, because the psalm continues by declaring that disobedience is rewarded with justice and vengeance. Who gets to execute this vengeance? From the literal context of the psalm, justice is executed through the praise of God's people.

This psalm presents two callings for God's people. First, the people are called to sing and worship the Lord who delights so much in them. Second, that praise of the Lord is a stand against the

¹ This may be due to the prohibition against performing sacrifices outside the Temple. Thus, with the majority of Jews in the world – outside the land of Israel at the time of Jesus who had no access to the Temple – lamb was not actually served at passover. The common element for all Jewish people, inside and outside the Land, was unleavened bread.

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wickedness and evil in the world. In antiquity, the Lord used Israel to bring his justice to nations, often through violent warfare. We continue – as the people of God – to have a participatory role to play in bringing redemption and justice to the nations. This may involve us participating in spiritual warfare but also definitely in us bringing the good news of Jesus to a confused world.

Romans 13:8-14. Paul lays out for us the obligation we have in response to the mercy and grace shown us by the Lord. We are to continually participate in the action of love. Love is not an emotion that can be affected by too much coffee or a sugar rush. It's not something we *fall into* and *fall out of* without any control. Love is an action and something we put into practice. From Genesis 22:2 – the first time the word love appears in the Bible – we understand that love is connected to sacrifice. Love is something we give away, not something to be hoarded and kept.

Paul instructs us that we should love as love is the fulfilment of the law. What does fulfil mean in its Hebraic context? To fulfil something does not mean to do something once and then never do it again, which is too often the way commentators approach the concept of Jesus fulfilling the law. An example of continually fulfilling the law is when someone asks: *How do you fulfil the command to honour your parents?* Perhaps the response is: *I assist with the garden, the shopping, home visits and spending time together.* These are not things you do once and then say ok now I have fulfilled that command by visiting my parents I never have to speak to them again.

Fulfilling the Torah has several nuances in Jewish thought. One is to interpret the Torah correctly – something we see Jesus constantly doing. Another is to then put that interpretation into practice. Not just once but continually!

Matthew 18:15-20. The gospel passage this week concerns a teaching of *halacha* regarding discipline within the community. *Halacha* comes from the verb *to walk* and describes the way of implementing teaching in the community. Paul, in his epistles, often urges us *to walk* in a manner worthy of the Lord (Col 1:10), which is where we put into practice the teachings and commands of Jesus.

The first part of the process of dealing with sin in the community is through communication. The purpose of communication is to reveal the fault or the hurt in a way that will lead to restoration. It is not to gossip or to condemn, as this will only result in more degrees of separation in the community. There is no call to bring in the elders or shepherds of the community, nor does the text specifically describe who exactly goes to speak to the offended party. However, the way you explain the issue is important. It is to be done alone – away from any public pressure – so that it does not bring shame or disrepute either to the person involved or to the name of God.

Should harmony not be restored, then the next step is to introduce two or three others as witnesses to the issue. This complements the instructions in the Torah in which judicial cases can only be decided through the testimony of multiple witnesses (Deut 17:6 and 19:15). Should there be a stubborn refusal to repent then it is acknowledged there is a broken relationship within the community. The

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one who has chosen to reject the call for repentance is then treated differently from other members of the community. Matthew says they should be treated as tax collectors and Gentiles, who are actually outside the family.

On an initial level that might seem quite harsh or even a little *un-Christian* to many of us, except that this teaching comes from the gospels so we need to understand the motivation here. Regarding someone as a tax collector or as a heathen does not mean that they are unloved or unwanted, but it does mean that they need to be regarded as someone who needs the forgiveness of God and the Spirit of God to come into their lives. It certainly means that the situation cannot continue as normal.

One of the issues we have in the church is that we often do not know how to disciple appropriately and all too often don't challenge sinful behaviour in our communities. Calling people within our community to repent is another participatory action that we do as members of the household of faith. We should approach this calling humbly and with love and grace with the ultimate goal being restoration.

Again we hear Jesus use the terms *binding* and *loosing*, which as we discussed last week is a Hebraic idiom for *permitting* and *not permitting*. In this context of church discipline, *binding* and *loosing* possibly refers to how we exercise judgment on behaviour. Do we permit sinful activity to remain within the community without being challenged? This will inevitably cause further breakdowns within the community. If we allow sin to remain in the church, then God will allow the result of sin to come upon the church.

In the last verse, we hear Jesus say that there is power in agreement and not in division and where two or three gather in my name, there he is! There is an early Jewish tradition that quotes Rabbi Hanania and says: When two sit and exchange words of Torah, the Shekinah – the Divine Presence – rests upon them (Pirke Avot 3:2). At the time of Jesus, there was a strong understanding in the power of unity and agreement. It wasn't magical in nature, but it was biblical.

Psalm 133 says that the Lord commands a blessing when brothers sit together in unity. The teaching of Jesus is a call for unity and community within the church. We will have the opportunity and challenge to tackle sinful behaviour together – bringing repentance and restoration and binding ourselves in loving unity in which the Spirit of God – will find his home amongst us.

ACNA Readings

Ezekiel 33:1-11. The prophet Ezekiel lived and prophesied in a time of incredible upheaval in the Jewish world. He was part of the Jewish exiles to Babylonia under Nebuchadnezzar. In this passage, the prophet reminds the diaspora community that they still have responsibility for each other as *watchmen*. They are to watch out for each other and warn each other of iniquity and sinful behaviour. Exile is no excuse for profaning the name of God through sinful behaviour.

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Ezekiel goes as far as saying that should you not warn someone of their iniquity then you are to blame for their guilt. If you really honestly believe that you have the truth in your hands and you deliberately withhold that truth from another who does not know the truth, then actually you are an evil person. This highlights how deep our responsibility is towards the members of our communities.

Verse 11 reminds us that God's desire is not to bring judgment on people, but rather that there would be repentance and a turning away from sin. The obligation we have then is to participate in the call to repentance and take the role of watchmen like Ezekiel. We are approaching Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement – in which the Jewish people will read the scroll of Jonah. Jonah is a call for the Gentle city of Nineveh to repent. They do but only because someone went to warn them with the truth!

Psalm 119:33-48. The longest psalm in the Scriptures is a meditation on the blessing and value of the Torah – the teaching and instructions of the Lord – and of the covenants that he keeps with his people. There is a tradition that this psalm was penned by David, but there is no actual evidence for this assertion. The desire of the author is that he would be taught the ways of the Lord. He demonstrates a commitment to put into practice the things that he learns. This should be the firm desire of every disciple of Jesus.

Verse 36 says, incline my heart to your testimonies. This is a humble acknowledgement that the Lord is part of the process of giving us the motivation to hear from God. If we find ourselves distracted by the world – as we so commonly do – and if we can't quite get back into the rhythm of prayer and study, then we should ask the Lord to impress that desire onto our souls.

One of the results of meditating on the Word of God is that we will then share the testimony of the Lord (v. 46). We will participate in sharing and inclining others towards the Scriptures. Perhaps when we call out for God to incline our hearts to him, he may send along a fellow believer to do just that. Sometimes we can hear the voice of God in the voice of our community.

Romans 12:9-21. Paul simply states that love must be sincere. Many within our culture today do not have the capacity to truly describe what real love is or even come close to recognizing a form of love that is sincere. Love – or something masquerading as that word – is too often used manipulatively in our modern world and all too often only associated with sexual intimacy. Love isn't something indistinct, unknowable, slippery, or amorphous. Biblically, love is very real and tangible. Love is something you can see and something that can be shown. It is an action with demonstrable qualities.

Paul describes several of those qualities in this passage. Love shows real devotion to others – it honours others, causes us to share with others, welcomes others into our homes, and provides all forms of hospitality to strangers. Those who love with sincerity can empathize with and share in the emotions of those around them. Love is shown in the way we treat each other with equality. The point is love is something you can see; so let it be seen with all sincerity and without manipulation.

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About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.