



**June 14, 2020 - Harassed and Helpless**  
**Given by Rev. Mattei**  
**Exodus 19:2-8a; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8**

The Scripture readings today seem to have a common theme: a call to holiness. And this makes a lot of sense considering that we are called in a filial relationship with God, the Holy One. As Christians, we look at the world events with the filter of our understanding of God's plan of salvation for the world. That plan includes the revelation of God as our Father and we as siblings and members of the same Body entrusted with the moral obligation to take care of one another: if one suffers all suffer.<sup>1</sup> Actually, it is more than a moral obligation: it is common sense self-care and wise stewardship of God's gift.

If we are blessed (and we better pray for that blessing), the proximity to the only One who is Holy will inspire contrition of heart<sup>2</sup> and a humble eagerness to make reparation for all the wrongs we have done, and do good to our neighbor.<sup>3</sup> On our journey to get closer to God, our impurities get purified: the corruption of the heart, the pollution of the mind, the sinfulness of the soul get exposed and redeemed. As the psalmist says, in God's Light we see light.<sup>4</sup> So, it is by an act of divine grace that we are drawn closer to the source of Life, our hearts are flooded with pure Love and our eyes are opened to the eternal Truth about God, about ourselves and about the lies we live by.<sup>5</sup>

In the reading from the book of Exodus we see that as the children of Israel encamped in the wilderness of Sinai, the Lord Yahweh spoke to Moses a message for the whole people. Yahweh God requested the people prepare themselves to hear what God had in store for them and warned them: *If they listened obediently to God's voice than they would be God's "priestly kingdom and a holy nation"*.

To be sure, God reminded them that their favored status is not anything that they had merited. In poetic form, the Bible thus reports God's message for the people entrusted

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:26

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 6:1-5

<sup>3</sup> Luke 19:8-9

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 36:9

<sup>5</sup> John 8:32; 14:17; 16:8-11



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to Moses: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.” In other words, “You are eye-witnesses of how I abhor evil, how disgusted I am with abuses and corruption, how precious to me are those who suffer because of violence, and how I brought you closer to the Source of Life, Truth, and Peace.”<sup>6</sup> God’s words make clear that the people will be required to adopt particular behaviors and to follow certain laws as part of the covenant relationship. The purpose of adopting these laws is nothing less than transformation. The liberation that they enjoyed was for the purpose of getting closer to God and therefore be a holy presence among the world’s people. Holy living includes non-harming our neighbor at a minimum, doing good and promoting the community’s well being.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that at the root of Christian theology there is the truth that Christ died for the ungodly! God’s extravagant act of mercy toward sinners in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ should inspire hope and confidence in us sinners in all our dealings with God. This gift above all others shows what God is really like. We stand justified before God on account of Christ “through whom we have obtained access to this grace.” Through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection we have access to the heart of God, the Holy of Holies. Because of Christ, we can be certain and can “boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God”. Recalling the covenant of old, to stand justified before God is not cheap grace. It requires persistent faith and humble obedience in times of temptation and discouragement. It requires discipline and courage in the face of adversity. It promises hope but only as the result of a long process that finds its starting point in suffering, recommends endurance, and builds character. That hope is affirmed by God's love “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” It comes to us free of charge and unexpected when we were still weak (other translations have helpless, unable, and powerless). Only a free conscience that has savored the free gift of grace knows remorse for abuses committed and is capable of growing in compassion and empathy for those who suffer.

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<sup>6</sup> The designation of the Israelites to be God’s “priestly kingdom and a holy nation” is so that they would experience Life, Truth, and Peace and carry that same message to the entire world. The prophet Isaiah made that crystal clear when he said on behalf of Yahweh that Israel would be a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6 and 49:).



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In the gospel of Matthew assigned for today, Jesus sends out his disciples to announce that “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This good news was not supposed to be empty promises reflecting a-pie-in-the-sky type of religion. It needed to be accompanied by the concrete actions of curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, and casting out demons. And none of this would be done for a profit. Jesus wanted his disciples’ mission to replicate his own and in compassionate response to the sad and upsetting realization that the masses were “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” No viable and caring leadership was to be found in the land and the people were suffering. Then, Matthew has Jesus address his disciples with a prayer request, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Somebody needs to respond to the call. Somebody needs to raise a prayer to God. God’s people cannot ignore the suffering.

What would it look like today to respond to our vocation of a holy life, to minister as Jesus did, and to care for the suffering neighbor? We would probably want to start with the Ten Commandments, with the minimalist approach of doing no harm, of avoiding any behavior that would cause another to suffer loss (of life, property, dignity, of the ability to nurture and sustain interpersonal relationships and to live in community.) Then I would ask myself what I could do to promote an integrated life for my neighbor. Sticking with Paul’s analogy of the Body, what could I do to care for all the members in a fair and smart way so that the whole body would be free of pain? If I had a toothache, would I blame my tooth for not being strong enough to withstand continued abuses? Would I yell at my tooth to stop hurting or would I soothe the pain with the appropriate medical care? Better yet, I could educate myself on tooth-decay prevention and exercise proper oral hygiene.

So, perhaps one thing we can do when confronted with people’s behavior we do not understand (e.g. the rioting we have seen lately in reaction to the murder of George Floyd when in police custody in Minneapolis), is, first of all, to refrain from judging even as we do not excuse the behavior and secondly to try and understand the amount of desperation that is behind the whole affair, educating ourselves or seeking out a mentor. Ignorance may be harmful. Thirdly, we need to move to the doing-good-by-your-neighbor phase: how can we use our affluence, social network, and voting



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privilege to promote social equity? In other words, how can we advocate for those in our midst who suffer from centuries-old social injustices? We may not have slavery anymore but our African American brothers and sisters still endure unrelenting oppression through the restrictions of racialized social structures (housing, policing, health care, banking, education, and so on.)

A public acknowledgment of our original sin of racism that caused the stealing of life and land would rebuild trust and unity in our divided society. Racism is a self-inflicted wound. If racism is a sin and I am a sinner, than racism is inside of me and I am in need of forgiveness and redemption. Jesus died for me so I could be healed and freed. Racism is a sin that speaks of our own disconnection with the divine inside of us, in all of us. Confession, renunciation, and denunciation of racism would restore humanity in all of us.

If the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ tell us something profound about the mystery of who God is, they also reveal the depths of our own identity as sinners set free. The story of our salvation shapes our identity in Christ: healed of our wounds and learning from that we become wounded healers; called out of our own stubborn egocentricity, we become companions and advocates. We set aside our own opinions to listen with an open heart to the pain of the marginalized.

May the Holy One lead us on the path of holiness and transform any delusion of racial superiority. Amen.