

15th Sunday in Pentecost 2020 / Proper 19

Readings - Exodus 14:19-31, Psalm 114, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction - 'What goes around comes around' and 'you reap what you sow' are common expressions in English to denote the important Biblical theme of *midah k'neged midah*, measure for measure. The concept of measure for measure continues to remain an important part of our western cultural psyche.

Common Theme - The message we see in these passages is not only that God delivers His people because He is good, but that He also deals with Israel and the Nations according to the Principle 'measure for measure', because He is a judge.

Hebraic Perspective - The sages ask, from where do we know that God responds to man with 'measure for measure'? The prophet Obadiah 1:15 explains 'The day of the Lord draws near on all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head.' Obadiah gives us an explicit example of measure for measure, Israel and the nations will indeed reap what they have sown.

Reading #1; Exodus 14:19-31 - For Israel, God's greatest act of deliverance is encapsulated in the Exodus and the parting of the Red Sea. The Angel of the Lord guided the Israelites out of Egypt. Then as the pursuing Egyptians closed in, the Angel joined with the pillar of cloud and light becoming a wall of darkness against Egypt. The Sea parted for Israel and closed in on the Egyptians, drowning Pharaoh's army. Here we see the themes of deliverance and judgement occurring in the same event. The Rabbis exegete that the Egyptians had drowned Israel's male children, leading to Moses being saved from the River into Pharaoh's house, and later with Pharaoh's army drowning in the Red Sea. The saviour/redeemer becomes the Judge in accordance with measure for measure.

Reading #2; Psalm 114 - The Psalm reflects the history of the Jewish people as 'born' from Egypt and the Exodus. It is one of the Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118 are known as the Egyptian Hallel prayers). God's central act of redemption was to be remembered and celebrated as part of the national memory of Israel. His characteristics of goodness and mercy are blended with His power and might in judgement, being simultaneously combined with the blessing of His presence in the community. This signature event finds its conclusion in the covenant at Mt Sinai where Israel becomes a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:3-6) and God takes up residence in the Tabernacle.

Reading #3; Romans 14:1-12 - It was understood that holiness and peace in the Christian community are interconnected. Sometimes we only think of holiness as no smoking, no drinking, no dancing etc. but it extends much further than that. Paul contains some practical instructions for maintaining peace and unity in the community. These instructions in Romans 12, 13, 14 are based on the imitation of God. As God is patient especially with those of weak faith then so too should we. This is the core of holiness.

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Reading #4; Matthew 18:21-35 - Jesus sets limits on the notion of measure for measure. While there is some truth to this principle it is not the whole truth and too often does not leave room for the grace of God. God Himself is the judge and it is He who will judge according to measure for measure. For disciples, though, our task is somewhat different. Instead of paying people back measure for measure, Jesus insists on forgiveness because ultimately that is the very nature of God Himself.

The disciples ask how many times they should forgive a person who wronged them, 'Up to seven times?'. This could be a reference to Jacob and his encounter with his brother Esau in which he bowed down 7 times when asking for forgiveness for stealing his birthright (Gen 33:3). Jesus's answer probably indicates that any actual set number misses the point and expanse of God's mercy and grace.

The parable of the unmerciful servant teaches the importance of forgiveness in the believer's life. God is a judge who will bring justice in measure for measure, however His character is reflected in the king's initial forgiveness of the servant. The concept of measure for measure is turn on its head. It is now forgiveness for forgiveness. Because we forgive we are forgiven, and likewise because we are forgiven we are able to truly forgive.

Hebraic Context - The foundation for Jewish life in the 2nd Temple period was to be holy because the Lord is holy. Being holy is not an intangible spirituality, an abstract. Rather it is understood to be the imitation of God. It is foundational for all synagogue teaching and also for the teaching of Jesus Himself. Be perfect just as your Father in Heaven is perfect (Matt 5:48) Be merciful just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:36) . The purpose of the imitation of God is to come close to the Father. How can one get close to God? The sages quote Deut 13:4 'Hold fast to Him' and then ask; How can you hold fast to Him when He is an all consuming fire? The sages answer by saying we bind ourselves to God by imitating His attributes, be holy because He is holy. As the epistle to the Hebrews says; 'without holiness no one will see the Lord' (Hebrews 12:14). We imitate God in all His goodness, compassion and forgiveness, and in so doing we have the blessing of seeing God in the midst of our communities.