

A Lectionary 23 9.10.23

Exodus 12:1-14

Focus Statement: God's Work, Our Hands

One of the first-year courses in seminary is a class, straightforwardly enough, called "Worship." The point of Worship, as you may have guessed from its rather descriptive title, is to teach all these eager pastors-to-be how to plan and preside over worship services. All worship services, we spent time on the big festivals and special services like weddings and funerals. But the big event, again, not surprisingly, was regular old Sunday morning worship, what we are doing right here today. The year before I started, LSTC's long-time worship professor had retired. So my class was the first class of the newly hired, and newly PhDed, Dr. Ben Stewart. Unlike now-retired Dr. Bangert, who was very much a nuts and bolts, do what the book says, sort of worship leader, Dr. Stewart, ink still wet on his diploma, wanted us to understand the theology and intentionality behind worship. We traveled to other congregations like budding anthropologists, studying the styles of other denominations. We contemplated the role of ritual in secular life. We watched movies, *Babette's Feast* for a discussion on the Eucharist, and a strange silent Japanese film called *Bath*, that was supposed to relate to baptism but actually put me to sleep, before its jarring, unexpected ending. The course was broad and far-reaching, and never seemed to get around to the actual specifics of the one thing we would be expected to do every Sunday morning for the rest of our careers, lead an assembly through worship. Finally, half-way through the semester, my classmate Dom, generally known as the one who asked the question we were all thinking, raised his hand. "Dr. Stewart," he interjected into a lecture on considering the various things that Lent might smell like, "this is great. I'm really enjoying all this conceptual idea-building. When building a metanarrative, it's important to

understand the socio-cultural framework while establishing the praxis for liturgical acts.” And here let me interject, Dom was our class question asker, because Dom always talked like that. “But here’s the question. Every Sunday I’m going to be expected to stand up in front of a large crowd of people and preside over communion. And can you please just teach us where my hands are supposed to go while I’m doing that.”

I share that antidote, because, in addition to being a pertinent question on God’s Work Our Hands Sunday, what do I do with my hands is what God was teaching the Israelites in our first reading today. Quick catch up because even for the Trinity folk who’ve been on this journey all summer, this passage sort of drops in the middle of nowhere. Last week we read the story of God appearing to Moses in the burning bush. You know the story, it’s a popular one. God comes to Moses in the bush, says, “I am who I am, go rescue my people from Pharaoh.” Moses isn’t stoked on this idea, God is persistent, Moses goes. Next week is another big hit, Moses parting the sea so the Israelites can go across. In between, another super well known Exodus story, the plagues. Moses tries to get Pharaoh to release the Israelites, Pharaoh says no, so Moses unleashes a series of plagues on the Egyptians, frogs, gnats, flies, boils, water turning to blood. You all know the story, or the outlines of it at least. The final plague is the worst one, the one that finally gets Pharaoh to relent, at least temporarily, and let the Israelites go, the death of every firstborn everything in Egypt. Given the “Greatest Hits” style of story choosing the lectionary has been going this summer, any of the plagues, and maybe especially the last one, seem like the logical choice for a text. But the lectionary pickers, in their infinite wisdom, did not choose any of the plagues, any of Moses’ moves of power. This text instead is basically what my classmate Dom asked our

worship professor for. Exodus chapter twelve is basically a play-by-play of, here's where your hands are supposed to be in worship. And what's interesting in its placement in the bible is, God taught the Israelites how to celebrate and remember the Passover before God did any passing over. Chapter twelve is basically God saying like, I'm going to do a thing, and you're not going to want to forget that thing, so here's how you should celebrate it every year after for all eternity, so that you never forget tomorrow. And "never forget tomorrow" not like, God is concerned the Israelites were going to forget how awesome God was with this spectacular party trick, but never forget tomorrow like here is how this day is to mold and shape and form you so that the celebration of this day changes how you as a community relate to each other and to this world that I, God have created for you, that I have called your ancestors and blessed them to be a blessing to and for. Each step in this liturgy professes the sort of world God wants for them.

The Israelites are to take a lamb for each family. The Hebrew word is actually *seh*, which is a generic word for animal from a flock. Seems a small detail, but what this does is it creates access for families who cannot afford a full lamb to still participate fully in the ritual. And if a family was too small even for that, there is provision for sharing among families. Passover has inclusion and accessibility written into its very rubrics, the very core of this worship is that all are able to participate fully and together. Then they eat as if they are ready to run, shoes on, cloaks on, staffs in hand, eating hurriedly as if Pharaoh himself may be knocking on their door at any moment. Imagine how it must have felt, must feel, to gather together with people of all shapes and sizes, ages and abilities, from across the socio-economic

spectrum, united in this act of hurried eating, because you know that God is coming to set you free and you don't want to miss a moment of that freedom.

In teaching them how to worship, God is instilling in them more than a rout thing to do with their hands once a year. God is shaping them to be a community who comes together, who looks out for each other, who are never satisfied with less than God's kingdom. Celebrating this festival year after year, again and again, builds in them this muscle memory that they are a people whom God loves, a people who are also to love each other, a people blessed to be a blessing, a people always reaching, striving, hoping, working towards, a world of freedom for all people. These festival practices God is setting out for them aren't so they remember the thing God did for them one time, it is to train them to always see how and where God is still leading them. Like training wheels for mission, coming together in worship, eating rushed, sharing a feast, connects the Israelites year after year, decade after decade, and eventually century after century and millenia after millenia, to a God who not just one time led them out of slavery, but who is always bringing them together in communities of hope and promise.

Dear people of God, that's what we're doing here this morning, that's what worship does. That's why the order of our events for this morning is so important. In worship we use our hands to pass plates, to feed and be fed, to greet our neighbors. We practice lifting our voices in prayer and praise and, an interesting thing about singing, we also practice the giving and take of listening, of melding our voices to the voices of others. We stand and we sit and we kneel, remembering that God gave us a body we can move through the world.

We hear we are forgiven, we come to know we are loved, we eat bread and drink wine that is never quite enough, that always leaves us hungry for more, and we go from this place to share that love and grace and forgiveness and hunger to a world in need. What a gift, what a privilege, what a sign of God's love, that God would create for us a space to dream and try and explore, together, so that we can be confident in the places to which God calls us.

Thanks be to God, who not only does God's work through us, but who gives us places to know and practice, to be filled and encouraged and changed by that love. Amen.