

**The 14th Sunday after Pentecost  
September 6, 2020  
St. Paul's, Wilmington, NC  
A Sermon by the Rev'd Raymond J. Hanna**

One of the things I find myself doing during this Pandemic is scarfing down food with reckless abandon. I can consume a whole pizza in record breaking time. I have the Copper Penny Pub on speed dial. I'll call in an order before leaving the office, it's ready at curbside in 10 minutes, then it is just another 5 minute walk to my apartment, and before the news is over, I have consumed more calories in 30 minutes than one should consume in a day. Speed eating has become a dangerous sort of comfort for me. For the Israelites in today's reading from Exodus, speed eating was not a dangerous sort of comfort, it was a practical skill for a people on the run. Apparently, God didn't think it was necessary for you to chew each mouthful of food at least 32 times before swallowing. God tells Moses and his brother Aaron to prepare a special meal— festival to the Lord. This meal will become an enduring symbol of freedom. As originated, the Passover was not an elaborate casual dinner savored over wine and candles. It was a feed your face as fast as you can, and run like hell dinner. It is dinner in a war zone. You don't even get a plastic fork and a take-away box. Just dig in with your hands and pull the meat off the bones.

Last week, we heard about Moses' encounter with God in the Burning Bush in which God instructs Moses to go down to Pharaoh and tell him to "let my people go". Today, we have skipped ahead to Exodus, Chapter 12. In the intervening chapters, a battle for freedom rages. Moses repeatedly goes to Pharaoh and demands that the slaves be freed, but Pharaoh continues to refuse. With each attempt Moses makes to convince Pharaoh to let God's people go, God provides him with a new weapon to try. We know them as the 10 plagues, cinematically captured in Cecil B deMille's iconic movie, "The Ten Commandments." The first plague cuts off the water supply to the Egyptians by turning the waters of the Nile River into blood. This is followed by a series of nine more plagues: an invasion of slimy frogs, gnats, flies, mad cow disease, an outbreak of festering skin boils, thunder and hail, and an invasion of locusts. I delayed a trip to Las Vegas last summer because there was a plague of grasshoppers causing havoc, and blocking entrances to hotels. I can't imagine what a plague of locusts was like. The ninth plague is one of utter devastating darkness. With each plague, Pharaoh's heart grows harder and he refuses to free the slaves, despite the fact that his advisors are telling him he has no other choice. At one point, Moses persuades Pharaoh to let a small group of slaves go outside the camp for three days to worship— Moses gets Pharaoh to agree to this because he tells him that the Israelites' worship practices might offend the Egyptians. It was a short lived freedom.

Finally, God brings out the ultimate weapon of mass destruction, the Angel of Death. God tells Moses to gather everyone into households—widows and childless couples were invited to join other families. Moses instructs each household to take a year old male lamb without blemish, slaughter the lamb, sprinkle some of its blood on the door posts and the lintel of the houses, then roast the whole lamb with bitter herbs and eat it with pita bread. They are to eat the whole lamb—teh tongue, heart, liver, kidneys, brain, and burn anything that is left over. They are to eat it with their suit case packed, their sandals on their feet, their staff in hand, and then they are to start running. The Angel of Death will pass through the land and strike dead the first born of every household unless he sees the blood of the lamb on the door post. The angel of death will passover those houses. The death of the first born is the plague that finally convinces Pharaoh to let the slaves go free, but even then, he chases after them, and his soldiers are drown in the Red Sea, or what is more accurately translated, as the sea of Reeds.

The Passover is a defining moment in Judaism. If you understand the Passover, you understand the essence of Judaism. The Passover is not just a physical, literal escape from the bondage of slavery. It is the promise that God's deepest desire is for us to be free— not just physically free, but spiritually free as well. Free from everything that imprisons our hearts and minds and souls. Jesus incarnates that concept of freedom when he himself becomes the Passover

lamb. Through his sacrifice on the cross, his atoning blood frees us from slavery to sin. We may not be chained up by Pharaoh, but we are all slaves to something—either self imposed, or forced upon us, that keeps us from living the authentic life God desires for us. We may be slaves to addiction, or anger, self-pity, racism, greed, gluttony, avarice, or self-righteousness. Paul extends the list of sins in today's epistle lesson to include doubt, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling, jealousy and self-gratification. Raise your hand if any of these sins apply to you. Don't worry, I can't see you. In reality, the preponderance of our sins is the state in which we often live and move and have our being. We are slaves to sin, often looking out for number one, stoking hatred and distrust. Such sins are rampant in our culture.

I don't want to live in a world like that. I'm sure you don't either. The good news is that we do not have to live in a world like that. We can change the world by running away, with God's help, from that which enslaves us, and running toward freedom, toward the light, toward forgiveness, toward reconciliation, toward agreement with one another for the common good. God gives us the tools for that journey, just as he gave the Israelites the might of the plagues, and manna in the wilderness, he gives us the gifts of the Spirit (gifts of healing, teaching, generosity, ministry). And he gives us manna for the journey—the bread of life, and the cup of salvation.

The freedom that the Passover promises, the freedom that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus gives us, is a freedom that comes with responsibility, not a license to do whatever is in our own best interest. Freedom is the responsibility “to owe no one anything except to love one another.” “Love your neighbor as your self is the true and complete fulfillment of the law.” It is the kind of law and order we all need. When we can love our neighbor as ourself, everything else becomes just a matter of working out the details.

Love your neighbor as your self. Imagine putting that line on a political bumper sticker, or those political flyers that overflow your mailbox everyday. “Love your neighbor as your self.” Better yet, don’t just imagine it, do it.