

If you read in last Wednesday's newsletter, You know that I will be teaching a class on Moses beginning in a few weeks. One reason is that we will be hearing the story of Exodus (literally exit) for the next couple of months in our Sunday morning readings. Although the story of Moses is legendary, it still speaks to the human condition in profoundly meaningful ways. To gather an understanding of the Book of Exodus, and Moses you must understand how this book fits into the larger narrative. It begins with the first verse in today's reading. "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." We don't know which pharaoh this was. Many think it was Rameses II. This new pharaoh, we are told, decided that a certain people, who could be identified by the color of their skin, the traditions of their ancestors, and their religious beliefs, were to be pushed to the side for the true natives of the land. These people, the Hebrews, were forced into work camps to build the cities of the pharaoh.

Now that first sentence ties Exodus to the previous story, that of Joseph, who brought his family to Egypt during a severe famine. His family was welcomed by that Egyptian pharaoh and for hundreds of years they lived in supposed harmony. It was only when this new king pointed his finger at them and warned against the Israelites taking up arms against them, did the relationship with the Hebrews change. The pharaoh was scapegoating the Hebrews which built up a feeling of national unity among his native people. He did this to solidify control, to build a feeling of unity for a certain class of people. But, no matter what the pharaoh did, the Hebrew people kept expanding to the point that he was forced to decree that all the boys born be killed.

These events happened over 3000 years ago in a very different world than we live. We have grown as people. We have come to terms with our history and have evolved to a point that we don't get drawn into pointing fingers at those other people and subjecting them in order to increase our own power and receive applause. We would never fall into that trap.

OK. So maybe it does happen. It is easy to point at a few specific people, but the thing is that all of us have this tendency. We associate with a specific group, an ally, a party, or those people who are most like us and we find it easy to point at the others around us as the problem. For many of us, that will not result in world conflict, but it does get in the way of fulfilling God's work in this world. It is often easy to see when someone else is doing as the pharaoh did, but it is much harder to see ourselves falling into the trap of placing blame on another group of people. That's because we believe we are right and they are wrong. When we fall into this cycle of blame, we fall short of the unity we so often proclaim to want. As spiritual people, we need to be aware of our role in the conflicts that exist around us and attempt to find ways to bring about justice in a world that will never be ready to accept it. In the abstract sense, everyone claims to want justice, but our actions lean toward the safer way. The one that maintains our position in the world.

I want to point out a few things in this passage about those who saved Moses. First, there were the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who figured out a way to disobey the order of the pharaoh. And then there was Pharaoh's daughter who found the baby floating on the Nile. She knew it was a Hebrew boy, but she figured out a way to save him. And then Moses's sister Miriam who stepped in to offer the services of her mother as nurse. All the people who figure out a way to subvert the Pharaoh's decree are women. They did not have the power in a patriarchal culture, but they figured out a way.

They were unlikely people making a difference in the world. It is often not the most prominent person, the ones with the most power, who will lead us to righteousness. It is almost always the unlikely people, the ones often on the margins, who figure out a way because they know their heart.

This is a good segue to the gospel passage today. This passage is the basis for the structure of the Roman Catholic church. Jesus passed the metaphorical keys to the kingdom to Peter and that lineage continues in the person of the Pope. But, what set Peter apart on that day was not his humanity but his testimony. Jesus asked the disciples a question, "Who do you say that I am?" They had spent years with Jesus at this point, so the question would seem to be an easy one. But they could only tell him what others said about him. In other words, they had done surveys to gauge the public's perception, but they weren't sure for themselves.

The words of Peter's proclamation were not as important as his conviction to say something, to be grounded in something, to have awareness of the situation. The same is true today. Who do you say Jesus is? Are you clear about it? Do you have understanding? Or are you just repeating what others have said?

The biblical passages today are all rooted in knowing who we are. Knowing what is essential. Knowing our heart and finding the confidence, the fortitude to stand up for it.

Living that kind of Christianity takes everything. It is about living differently, all the time. Not just when it is convenient, but when it is necessary. Last week, we talked about the importance of what comes out of our mouth. Words are important (as we see every day on the news). When we come to clarity about what is right and we express it in our words, it will be magnified by the choices we make. I call on you to consider ways that you can stand up for what you believe without pointing a finger at another group, but by living to make a difference. We all have work to do. We will never build bridges if we don't respect the dignity of those on the other side. Success has little to do with being right and everything to do with being grounded in something greater than self.

So be made of conviction and strive for justice and peace for all people.