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“The First Move is the Deepest”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 14, 2020

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Holy Scriptures: Exodus 32: 1-14

Call to Confession

Beloved, God responds quickly to the choices we make. Our actions have consequences in our relationships with one another and God. Whether we want it to or not, our choices and deeds influence God’s responses and actions. Repent, turn away from evil, believe in the Good News, and do what is pleasing in the sight of the Lord.

Unison Prayer of Confession

We thank you, Lord, for making us in your divine image. We are also deeply grateful that you are like a potter, shaping and molding us like clay on a spinning wheel. Hear our confession of sin and wrongdoing. Transform us with your grace. Like the psalmist who sought cleansing and pardon, we ask you to “create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10) Amen.

Exodus 32: 1-14

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” ² Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.” ⁶ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷ The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” ⁹ The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

¹¹ But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great

power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” ¹⁴ And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

The First Move is the Deepest

In Exodus Chapter 32,
when the Israelites worship a graven image, a golden calf,
God is so upset that the Lord
threatens to slay the Israelites right where they are in the dessert.

The Lord said to Moses,
*“Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely;
they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them...
I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are.
Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them
and I may consume them;
and of you I will make a great nation.”*

“These are your people,” said Moses,
*“whom you brought out of the land of Egypt
with great power and with a mighty hand.”*

We can overhear Moses speaking up for his neighbors, asking for mercy,
reminding our Creator that it was the Lord, not Moses,
who brought them up out of the land of Egypt,
out of slavery. out of bondage.

What would everyone else think? asks Moses.
What would the Egyptians say?
Would they say, “Here is a Deity who frees people only to kill them later?”

Maybe Moses raised these objections
because God dropped the line, *“of you I will make a great nation,”*
declaring that God would start a new people from Moses,
who was already well advanced in age,
and this seemed like a daunting task.

The Bible tells us that God relents,
has a change of heart and mind,

and spares the Israelites for their discretion.
The intervention of Moses inspires, informs, intercedes.

Moses the Intercessor

Sounds like the title of a movie, or a summer novel, or a warrior.
A prayer warrior, more likely.
An intercessor is one who intercedes on behalf of another soul
or on behalf of a whole body of souls.
This takes courage and a bit of hutzpah.

Intercessors like Moses, Amos, Isaiah, and Ruth, like Jesus Christ and His Church,
like you and me, are bold, brave, beholden to God's power and love.
Intercession is daring, a bold act,
fearlessly, faithfully asking forgiveness, seeking mercy, holding out for grace
because you know, you know the character of God.

Moses knew the character of God.
*"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."* --Exodus 34: 6; Psalm 103: 13-14

Ah, this is a God we can follow, we can love, can speak to about our innermost need.
It is in the very character of the Lord to remember that we are dust,
that we are made and will return to the One Who Created and Creates,
that with God we have a covenantal relationship grounded in love,
for we are God's people and the Lord is our God,

The character of God is to always respond, one way or another,
at God's discretion, in God's timing, with God-sized portions
-- Big Love, a Big Table, a Big Beloved Community --
with portions that are abundant, extravagant, overflowing,
spilling out, spilling over, anointing, blessing, redeeming.
It is the nature and nurture of God to offer and provide with such abundance.
It is God's forgiveness and mercy and grace we seek.
So we send up and out our appeals,
and we wait with pregnant expectation.

They say that one day Jason, Bob and Dave were on a hike
when they came upon a raging river.
They needed to get to the other side but had no idea of how to do so.
Jason prayed to God, saying, *"Please God, give me the strength to cross this river."*
Poof!
God gave Jason big arms and strong legs,
and he was able to swim across the river in about two hours,
although he almost drowned a couple of times.
Seeing this, Dave prayed to God, saying,

“Please God, give me the strength and the tools to cross this river.”

Poof!

God gave Dave a rowboat and he was able to row across the river,
after almost capsizing a couple of times.

Bob had seen how prayer worked for Jason and Dave,
so he prayed,

*“Please God, give me the strength, the tools, and the intelligence
to cross this river.”*

Poof!

God turned Bob into a woman.

She looked at the map, hiked around a bend in the river,
then walked across the bridge.

We use our strength, our wisdom, our brains to do wonders.

We pray.

We ask.

We seek.

We intercede for one another.

*“We can't pray that God make our lives free of problems;
this won't happen,” said Rabbi Harold Kushner,
“and it is probably just as well.*

*We can't ask Him to make us and those we love immune to diseases,
because He can't do that.*

*We can't ask Him to weave a magic spell around us
so that bad things will only happen to other people,
and never to us.”*

*“People who pray for miracles usually don't get miracles,
any more than children who pray for bicycles, good grades, or good boyfriends
get them as a result of praying.*

*But people who pray for courage,
for strength to bear the unbearable,
for the grace to remember what they have left
instead of they have lost,
very often find their prayer answered.”* ^[1]

Moses the Intercessor

Like Moses, who conversed with God,

we intercede, we appeal, beseech, and pray fervently
on behalf of our beloved friends and family,
for neighbors we know

and those we have yet to meet yet care about
because we know deep down inside
that we are somehow connected.

We may intercede on behalf of ourselves,

telling God all about our souls, our bodies, our very life and livelihood.

We intercede because we expect, we trust

that something good will come of it.

Like Moses, our intercessory action sometimes comes out of empathy,
out of an inner compassion,

a love and compassion we embody, together.

We intercede because we care and can do no other.

We have this divine compassion that bubbles up from within
and reaches out to support and serve someone else's need.

We intercede because we expect, we trust
that something good will come of it.

Sometimes our intercessory action comes from a place of anger.

Not like the anger you express when someone inadvertently steps on your toe.

We're talking about the anger that rises up and wants to explode
whenever someone purposefully steps on a whole bunch of toes,
of innocent toes.

Once on a church-sponsored Habitat for Humanity build,

I hit my thumb with a hammer.

Suddenly it got very, very quiet.

Everyone around me stopped to listen,
waiting to hear what words a preacher uses
when he hits his thumb with a hammer.

Well, what words should Christians use

when someone strikes a whole bunch of thumbs, on purpose?

Sometimes we are called to intercede with a well-thought out anger,

a righteous anger,

an anger at wrongs and wrongdoing,

at injustice and inequality, senseless violence and violated bodies,

at ineffectual leadership and blind followership,

at unfed hungers and unmet wants.

We intercede because we expect, we trust

that something good will come of it.

We may intercede from a place of hope.

Hope is a divine gift that helps you catch a vision of a better tomorrow,

to see it, reach for it, and bring that vision, that dream, into today's reality.

"...we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand," said the Apostle Paul,

"and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings,

knowing that suffering produces endurance,

and endurance produces character,

and character produces hope,

and hope does not disappoint us,

because God's love has been poured into our hearts

through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”
“God proves [God’s] love for us
in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5: 2b-5, 8)

We intercede because we expect, we trust
that something good will come of it.

Moses the Intercessor

Moses appeals to the character of God on the Hebrew’s behalf, on our behalf.

Moses knows the character of God,
and we know God’s character as well.

God weeps when we weep,
hears the cries of the oppressed,
heals the sick and gives sight to the blind.

Moses knows that God delivers people from slavery
“with great power and with a mighty hand.”

God nurtures widows and orphans who have no one else
“with great power and with a mighty hand.”

God advocates for the poor and aliens in our midst
“with great power and with a mighty hand.”

Moses prays that God will relent.

To repent means to turn 180°,
to turn away from sinful behavior,
to move toward the ways of God.

To relent is more akin to what God was asked to do,
and exactly what the Lord chose.

After the Hebrews worshipped a golden calf and God promised to destroy them,
Moses appealed to God to relent,
appealing not on the basis of the Hebrew’s behavior or qualities,
but rather on the basis of God’s character.

Moses is convinced
that God has to make the first move, the first step.

He successfully intervenes; the appeal is heard.

God does relent

It shall not be.

*“And the Lord changed his mind
about the disaster
that he planned to bring on his people.” Ex. 32: 14*

Divine vengeance will not happen.

President George Herbert Walker Bush loved to tell the story
of the child who offered this simple prayer:

*“God, bless my parents, my brother and sister,
and God, take care of Yourself,
because if anything happens to You, we are all sunk!”*

Without God, we are all sunk.

You see, God’s loving, forgiving nature is what makes it possible for people to change.^[2]

Our repentance, our transformation,
our best hope & prayer to become the change the world cries out for
result from our trusting that God makes the first step toward us.

This is made abundantly clear in the Hebrew Scriptures & the New Testament:
God--and God alone--makes the first move,
which is toward us.

Sorry to pop our narcissistic bubble, but the redeeming work of God in Christ Jesus
had nothing to do with human initiatives.

As Paul said, *“God proves [God’s] love for us
in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5: 8)

Moses interceded because he understood, he believed, he had the conviction
that if there is any hope for us,
it’s that the first move is made by God,
who is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.^[3]

· I wonder whether we wrestle with this scripture, this testimony
because it’s humbling, reminding us to trust in God to make the first
move,

to reach for us.

If there is any hope, it is that God is merciful.

· I wonder whether we wrestle with trusting in the mercy of God
because sometimes we are not loving,
not merciful and as kind as we ought.

· We may struggle with being scolded by the Word,
with being examined and turned inside out,
yet the Word teaches that -- first and foremost -- we are loved,
which eases the path to change and transformation.

· I wonder whether after hearing that even God can relent,
and that forgiveness starts with the holy,
it may provide a path for some of us to be personally transformed.

For Moses, God’s designs and dispositions are more akin to dreams.

The God we know and follow is a Dreamer,
with dreams for us to live out and live into and love for.

Walter Brueggemann said, *“We carry the dreams of God in our daring bodies.”*

Divine dreams come to fruition in our daring bodies,
especially when we embody the character of God ourselves,

becoming goodness and mercy with some skin on it.
I wonder about God's prayers, hopes, dreams for each of us
and all of us, together.
God's already made the first move.
Now it's our turn.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] Harold S. Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People

[2] The New Interpreter's Bible. P. 409.

[3] The New Interpreter's Bible, P. 409.