

Sermon: The Rev. Christopher Bishop
St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Radnor, PA
12 Pentecost, Sept. 4, 2011

Lectionary:

- [Exodus 12:1-14](#)
- [Psalm 149](#)
- [Romans 13:8-14](#)
- [Matthew 18:15-20](#)

Well, today's readings certainly are timely. They get *right at* something we have been engaged in here of late at St. Martin's, and that is a deep inquiry into the nature of relationship. Relationship with God and with each other—the basis of our two great commandments. And what's great about these texts is that they can give us pretty clear indications of both what we think about our relationship with God, and also, what God seems to think about His relationship with us. So let's look inside these texts, and see how God's understanding of, and fulfilling on relationships can inform our own.

You may recognize the Exodus reading today as the basis for the yearly observance of the Jewish Passover. What fascinates me about this type of passage is the detail. Things like specifying the exact day, the 10th day of the first month, the age and selection of the unblemished lamb, sopping blood on the doorposts, cooking and eating the lamb with sandals on and bags packed. And that remembrance of this is so critical to the life of this community they must not only recall it, but reenact it, in detail, every year without fail, as ordinance, as law. It seems from this central event in the Jewish tradition that what God really asks for in relationships are actually just good, old fashioned, time-tested qualities: constancy, fidelity and accountability.

Looking at Exodus, its useful to recall that it is primarily a priestly text—written by and for priests. It is a thorough listing of the laws and commandments, all 607 of them, and essentially constitutes a “how-to” for Jewish faith. So liturgical elements will, of course, be strong. But what lay behind liturgical consistency? What, really, is the whole purpose of the Jewish, and our, traditions? Well, if we hold relationship in one hand, and constancy, fidelity and accountability in the other, what we are really describing is the nature of *commitment*. *Not* merely what are God's, and our, thoughts, and expectations about relationships, but rather God's and our *commitments*?

As we discuss commitments based upon constancy, fidelity and accountability, it will be useful to keep in mind just how counter-cultural these things actually are in our society. Maybe the most broad, stark, and disturbing example right now is this humanly created, utterly avoidable economic mess we are in. There are specific, identifiable systems, entities and individuals whose rapaciousness and greed are directly responsible for the economic ruination and suffering of millions of people. And to date, not one has been held accountable.

Contrast this with the story I recently heard about a single mother who raised 5 young children by herself in the 1950s, working 3 jobs, who simply by dint of her constant and unwavering devotion sent 4 kids to Harvard, and one to Malaysia as a missionary. Her life was a proof that from living inside that kind of commitment, giving of one's self without reservation, extraordinary life can be brought into being. Constancy, fidelity, accountability, commitment. Both in our private lives and the common life we share—the stakes in this question are huge.

So, let's begin with God. What commitment has God demonstrated, what has God done? Well, for starters create the universe and every atom, force and mystery in it. And, inside that gargantuan commitment, God created us, along with the capacity to recognize, whether we choose to or not, that every single thing we have down to the very breath we are drawing at this instant is an ongoing blessing provided us by God, excepting nothing. I can't speak for you, but that fact alone fills me with wonder. Gratitude. And there is no other word: love. And the entire corpus of our scripture is primarily the description, not of how human beings have been faithful to God—mostly we fail at this—but how God has remained faithful to us.

As Christians we witness that God's commitment to us is so great he offers the very life of his beloved Son to heal the brokenness in our relationship with our Creator. And as for Jesus, his constancy, fidelity and accountability in service to the full measure of his commitment, surely speak for themselves. Again—the stakes are extremely high, and it matters.

And what of our own sense of relationships and commitments? What do you rely on in yours? Knowing us as Yis-rael, the stiff-necked people who contend with God, who at times will find any way to shirk or minimize our commitments, today St. Paul really

tries to keep it simple. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments... are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." In a nutshell, that's it. In our relationship with God, basically, we are asked to do only two things well: Love God with our whole heart, mind and strength, and love and care for each other and the creation, just full of neighbors, human and otherwise. Again, the sheer generosity of this covenant is mind-blowing. And its not rocket science, but sometimes looking out over our world it seems to be. And here is just where the counter-cultural part of this stuff really hits us. We live in a society where for many the main religion is money. And as far as loving one another, our crime, incarceration, death penalty, child poverty, among others, rates are heart-breakingly high for a nation of our wealth, and history of moral and social development.

So this call from God to find ways to love each other, *no matter what*, is extraordinarily important. In the end, perhaps, our very survival will depend upon it. But if we can actually hear it, or as Paul says, "Wake from our sleep," this relationship, this commitment to love based upon constancy, fidelity and accountability can provide us access into a whole new realm of being. A place where we become a profound contribution to a divided and angry world. A place where our relationships work better because we are listening with the ears of the heart, and *our word is our bond*.

Well, thankfully, scripture isn't just full of fine, high-fallutin ideas, but also practical advice. And that's our Gospel today. How do we actually live into loving, committed relationships with one another in the midst of conflict? As spiritual teacher and relationship guru *par excellence*, Jesus gives a process of how a committed relationship based upon constancy, fidelity and, especially, accountability can work in practical terms in a community just like ours.

If you have a conflict with someone in the church, go speak to them. Hear them out. Tell them your issue. If that doesn't resolve it, take a friend or two with you. If harmony still isn't restored, then it may become a matter for the church. But notice, even at that point, Jesus directs us to "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." But how does Jesus treat the tax collectors and gentiles of 1st century Palestine? He invites them to dinner. Or welcomes one to be his disciple. Or heals them.

When I read this passage this week, I was reminded immediately of our first vestry meeting here at St. Martin's. That night we established a covenant of direct communication, eschewing all forms or tolerance of rumors or gossip—as these things are universally poisonous to a church community. We agreed that if anyone has any issue or conflict with another— and if we are really committed to a living, breathing, honest relationship with one other *we will*— go directly to that person and discuss it, work it out. This is the surest sign of truly caring, as opposed to merely complaining. Because if its actually important, you can't resolve a breakdown in relationship with Jack by talking to Jill.

This may seem like a small thing, but sometimes it's the small commitments we keep that empower God to grow in us the full expression of our spirit. It is the quality of all our relationships, from the person who gave us birth, to the person we pass on the street— what we stand for, who we stand with, and what of ourselves we are willing to give— that creates us and tells the world who we are. The eldest son of the poor single mother I mentioned, now a professor of economics at Oxford, broke down in tears as he told the world who his mother was.

My friends, we have been invited into the most extraordinary, generous covenant imaginable. Sometimes I think if we really understood the deal we were getting, the sheer lovingkindness, and possibility of it all, every mouth fed, every thirst slaked, every heart treasured, the earth itself would break into song. And by being flagrantly and unreasonably faithful, trustworthy, and honest in our relationships with God and what God has made, knowing we will do so at times imperfectly, we truly are fulfilling our commitment to the life of love that *is* our part of the covenant. The covenant we entered into in our baptism, restated in our confirmations, and reaffirm every single time we come to God's table for solace, strength and sustenance. And, thus fed, are sent out to be God's word of love and peace and truth for the world.

Amen.