

# You Are Loved

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Referenced: Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

My friends, may I speak to you in the name of the one, the Holy and the Forgiving God. Amen.

So, I don't know if you've noticed yet, but y'all, I grew up in the deep South. You might be able to tell by the fact that I already used "y'all" in this sermon, or by the slight twang to my voice, or some of you have maybe already come across the beloved phrase, "bless your heart." I grew up in the Bible Belt. I grew up in the foothills of the smoky mountains where the Tennessee River had carved that sacred landscape. I grew up and was formed by that people and that place, it is the bedrock of my faith. I'm a cradle Episcopalian, I like to say cradle slowly moving towards the grave (hopefully slower). I was formed by my parents and my grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, by my church community, clergy, vacation Bible school teachers, Sunday school teachers, choir directors, and everything in between. And the message I consistently got as a child, and I hope you all received as well, is that God loved me unconditionally: just as I was. As Psalm 139 reminds us, we are all "fearfully and wonderfully made."

And I took that to heart: that I was unconditionally unfathomably, loved by God: end stop, no questions asked. And yet, as I mentioned, I grew up in the Bible Belt. I grew up going to Christian-based schools from second grade through my senior year of high school. I like to say I was formed in the breadth and depth of the Christian tradition. And so although the message that I got from my family and from my church family was that I was loved unfortunately amongst other siblings in Christ, that was not what I was always told. When I was in fourth grade, I remember my beloved friend who was a P.K. (a.k.a. a pastor's or a priest's kid), she told me that I was going to hell because I had been baptized as an infant. Well, that was news to me. And then later on when I started at a new school, I was told I was not allowed to receive communion in that tradition, which hurt me. It was supposedly because my beloved Episcopal Church did not align with their theology of the Eucharist.

This condemnation, this judgment was so antithetical to the God that I knew, to the God that I had grown up hearing about in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, in choir and at the dinner table when we said grace; a God who again is all about love. These experiences were really disorienting that within the church, within the larger body of Christ, that we've created insiders and outsiders, those who are right and those who are wrong. And we've done this over and over again, over millennia as the church. You might be the outsider because of your class, or your gender, or your race, or your sexuality. We use these defining factors over and over again to choose who is in and who is out.

This is what Paul is talking about in his letter to the Romans today. For any vegetarians and vegans, you are still loved, I promise you. But in Paul's letter to the Romans, he's reminding the church there that those who keep kosher, a.k.a., the people who are eating vegetables because they don't want to eat non-kosher meat with Gentiles, that they are also as worthy, as loved, also fully

encompassed in this part of the community. That these dividing lines that we've created as human beings do not exist in the kingdom of God. They don't exist in the family of God, but we are really good, y'all, at judging other people, aren't we? And just as a reminder, usually the thing we're most ready to judge in someone else, is the thing that we don't like about our very selves.

Our scripture readings from today~not just the letter of the Romans, but also Exodus and today's parable from Matthew, which I don't know about you, but that felt like a punch to the gut reading that gospel this morning~, these are also nuanced scriptures that we are trying to figure out, that the people of faith are trying to discern who is in and who is out. And instead of getting caught up with the details, with the chaos of the surface level reading of scripture, we're going to dive deep today. We're going to go into the depth of the river below the rapids, and we're going to find that deep, well, that deep truth that is our God.

So what can we discern about the truth of who our God is in this reading from Exodus? We hear that our God is a God of liberation, that our God is a God of freedom, that our God lifts up the lowly and brings them to the promised land. We hear that our God is a God who lifts up the oppressed, who makes sure that there is equity in the land, that all are beloved by God. No power, no regime has the right to put down another person or peoples. And so God takes the enslaved Israelites out of the land of Egypt, out of the hand of Pharaoh and leads them across the Red Sea. And that is good and holy and important work that we are all called to participate in, children of God. And yet, when I hear that Pharaoh and Pharaoh's army were drowned in the sea, I get a little knot in the pit of my stomach. Because again, if I am loved unconditionally, is not every child of God loved as unconditionally as well?

But we human beings, going back to our Jewish ancestors, we have this uncanny ability to work out our understanding of God in the stories that we tell. So this is people working out their understanding of God. But later, Jewish rabbis would comment on this story from Exodus and they would illustrate that the Israelite people and the heavenly chorus were praising God for the overthrow of Pharaoh and the army and their destruction. And yet God spoke to the heavenly host and said, "Do you not know that they are my children as well?"

Over time, we as the church have refined ourselves, have reformed ourselves, have gotten to a place that we know that anytime we've created insider/outsider language, God is going to challenge us on that. God is going to ask us to impart grace. God is going to search out forgiveness instead of judgment.

So in Exodus, if God liberates in enslaved peoples, then why is Jesus in today's parable using the image of master and slave? To my 2023 ears, this sounds very strange. This is actually really uncomfortable. And we have to remind ourselves that 2000 years ago, that unfortunately that was the reality of the ancient world. I also want to remind ourselves that Jesus is speaking in a parable. A parable is a teaching tool. A parable is a story. It is an illustration. It's not fact. But these are examples for how we can understand that deeper truth of who God is in our world, of who God is in our lives.

If we sit in the rapids for a little bit, in this discomfort of scripture, let's hone in on one detail from the story, the detail of the 10,000 talents. Now for us, that might not seem like an extreme exorbitant number, but one talent back 2000 years ago was worth a whole year's wages. So how in heaven or on earth did this individual amass a debt of 10,000 years' worth of work? It's hard to

believe. It's supposed to be ridiculous. It's supposed to remind us that, well, maybe these facts are not actually facts to begin with.

What we hear in today's parable though is that even with a debt that we think of as larger than life, a debt that we think is unpayable, a debt that we think will never be reconciled, Jesus says, "Hey, wait a minute. God loves you unconditionally. God loves you so, so much that even that can be gone, that even that will be forgiven, that even that will be washed away in God's love." That's what grace and forgiveness looks like.

In Matthew's Gospel, our beloved disciples (who, I don't know about you, but I think they are rather entertaining sometimes) are trying to figure out who amongst them is the greatest. That's what they're worried about. Just 10, 12, 15 verses earlier. They're worried about who is the greatest among them. They're creating human hierarchies. They're arguing about who is in and who is out, who's in the inner circle, who's going to sit at the right hand of God. Yet Jesus reminds them in this parable, y'all again, that's not what it's about. Instead, we are all God's beloved children, each and every one of us. The reality is that we, the church, forget that sometimes. We actually forget about our own belovedness. We forget about the grace that God has instilled in our own lives, the forgiveness that we have received. Instead, we place judgment on someone else. Instead, we condemn someone else. Instead, we ostracize someone else.

So what is the deep truth of this parable as complicated and complex that as it is? It is that we as Christians, if we actually want to honor the image and likeness of God that resides inside of ourselves, that is deep within our very being, but has been yes, corrupted by these broken systems, if we want to get back to that, if we want to honor that, if we want to hold onto it, then we have to forgive others just as we have been forgiven. If we are meant to be a community of love, my friends, we have to make space for everyone at the table.

So this morning, as we stand as we are able, in body or in spirit, and confess to God and ask forgiveness, I invite you this Sunday to maybe not self-sabotage, to maybe not say, "I am so unworthy, and undeserving, and less than, and not enough." Instead, what if we came at confession with humility, admitting that we are all a part of manipulative, broken systems, and yet we are all in need of God's love? What if we came at confession instead of saying, "we are less than," and we ask God instead to uncover the image and likeness of the Divine that resides inside of our very selves? What if we actually loved ourselves as we are called to love all of God's children? My friends, that would indeed be transformational, that would indeed be liberating, that would truly be resurrecting for God's church. So this morning, if you've been told other, if you've heard a different story, I just want to remind you that you are loved unconditionally, that you are enough just as you are. And that with God's help, we can continue to uncover the Divine image that dwells in each one of us. Amen.