

## 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21; Matthew 18:21-35; Romans 14:1-12**

**Exodus 14:19-31** is the story of Yahweh's miraculous deliverance of Israel at the Reed (not Red) Sea (see below). As such, the "Red Sea" experience is to the Jewish faith what the resurrection of Jesus Christ is to the Christian faith. If Passover is their "Good Friday" where the Israelites are delivered in the midst of death, the crossing of the "Red Sea" is their Easter Sunday. For it is the day when God demonstrates God's self as Israel's deliverer from the very jaws of death, and Israel is saved from certain annihilation. As such, it is Israel's central salvation story.

A word needs to be said about the identification of the body of water which Israel crossed. The actual Hebrew word for the sea used through Exodus 14 is "*yam suph*", which must be literally translated "sea of reeds". It is not "*yam edom*", which would be "Red Sea". What was the "Reed Sea"? We do not know, for no such sea exists today. However, as anyone who looks at a topographical map of Egypt can readily discern, there is an amazing cleft between the continents of Africa and Asia which is filled to the south by a finger of the Red Sea (the Gulf of Suez). At one time, it is obvious that these two continents were separated from each other, and the present cleft is the remnant of that separation. The remainder of the land along that cleft, before the Suez Canal was built down it, was filled with small to large lakes. The Reed Sea was probably one of those lakes near the northeast end of Egypt. A lake so named was marshy and muddy, full of reeds, and was, at its deepest, about ten feet deep. The identification of the body of water over which the Israelites journeyed as the Red Sea is highly improbable since the Red Sea is much too far south and it does not fit the description of the body of water described in Exodus 14. It is pure tradition that the sea is the Red Sea, because there is no linguistic justification for translating the Hebrew as "Red Sea"; the only way the Hebrew can be translated is "Reed", and we will translate it as such.

But the identification of the body of water is not as important as is the significance of the event that happened there. The conflict that happened there both brought to a close one chapter of Israel's history and opened another. It was the closing event of Israel's period of slavery in Egypt and, consequently, God's certain liberation of the Israelite people from Pharaoh's control. But it is also the opening of Israel's journey of salvation in the wilderness where they are molded into a nation centered in their God and in which they shape their life together as a people by building their political, economic and religious systems under Yahweh. Thus, the signal that Israel is moving into their time of wilderness formation is that this segment of their history is inaugurated by the drying up of the Reed Sea so that they can cross into the wilderness. And the signal that their period of wilderness formation is ending is the drying up of the Jordan River (Joshua 4-5) so that they can leave the wilderness and cross the dry river bed in order to enter their promised land of Canaan! Waters are parted for the Israelites' arrival in the wilderness, and waters are parted for their departure!

The conflict at the Reed Sea is not so much the final conflict between Moses and Pharaoh (in fact, they never even meet at the sea) as it is the final conflict between Yahweh and Amon-Re. In this conflict, Yahweh demonstrates that he is, indeed, unquestionably supreme. Amon-Re is a nature deity, the giver of life and death to all. Yahweh is a deity of history, the one who causes

history to be what Yahweh causes it to be. But here, even more profoundly than in the plagues and in the passing over of the angel of death, Yahweh demonstrates that he is the lord of nature and of nature's god, Amon-Re. This is what makes of this struggle the central story of salvation in the book of Exodus.

Faced with Israel's almost certain annihilation as they are trapped on the shores of the Reed Sea, God miraculously delivers the Israelites by parting the Reed Sea. Not only is the sea split in two, but God also dries the seabed, so that the Israelites can cross with their beasts of burden and their heavy wagons. When the Egyptian army enters it, however, and before the waters close in upon them, the ground is re-moistened by God so that the chariot wheels, although much lighter than the weighed-down Israelite wagons, get stuck and thus delay and bottle up the charging army (14:25). Then God brings the sea crashing around the frenzied Egyptian army (vss. 26-28). Thus, Yahweh has the power to part the sea. And Yahweh has the power to reverse the process in order to destroy the Egyptian army. And all Amon-Re can do is to helplessly stand aside in the person of the Pharaoh and watch!

Now to the story itself.

With Pharaoh's release of the Israelites from their bondage, the Hebrews were now free of their Egyptian task-masters. They virtually danced out onto the desert, skipping along in excitement at the freedom that had come to them and the wealth showered upon them by an Egyptian people happy to see them go! So they marched into the desert east of Egypt, heading toward the Reed and Red Seas that acted as natural barriers between Africa and Asia, Egypt and the Sinai desert. They were on their way to meet with Yahweh, their God, at Mount Sinai.

But suddenly, those at the back of the Israelite procession became alarmed. They could see clouds of dust rising far behind them. A few went back to scout out what was happening. They returned with dreadful news. The greatest army in the world – the Egyptian army was on the march, pursuing the former slaves. Had Pharaoh reneged on his command that the Israelites were to be set free? Was his army pursuing them in order to slaughter all of them in the desert? Was the Pharaoh taking revenge upon them?

The news of the sighting quickly went up the Hebrew procession until it reached Moses. Upon receiving the news, Moses turned and saw the clouds arising ever closer to their rear. The Egyptian horses and chariots were indeed racing toward them. Now the Reed Sea standing before them was no longer an invitation to leisurely cross in order to reach Mount Sinai. Now the Reed Sea stood as a massive barrier against which the Israelites would huddle, waiting for the rushing Egyptian army to catch them and to slaughter them there in the desert. What would Moses do? What would Yahweh do?

God was the first to act. Suddenly between the fleeing Hebrews and the advancing army, a pillar of cloud came from the heavens, with fierce winds blocking access to the Israelites. At night, that pillar glowed like fire, threatening to sear the Egyptian soldiers to death. The army was now held at bay. But the army simply gathered behind the wall of cloud, wind and fire, waiting for it to disperse.

It now became Moses' turn to act. The people complained loudly to Moses that he had led them into a trap and that God didn't care for their plight at all. But God told Moses what to do. And although what Yahweh told Moses to do sounding nothing short of suicidal, Moses did as he was told.

Moses stepped to the edge of the Reed Sea and lifted his staff over the sea. Suddenly, a violent wind came up the Reed Sea and – miracle of miracles – the water parted before the Israelite people. The water banked on one side and on the other side of the sea, so that dry land appeared – dry land that stretched across the sea to the desert on the other side. Then Moses commanded the people to walk across the sea bed to the other side. And though scared half to death, the people did as they were told. They, their children, their elderly, their animals and carts scurried across that sea bed. Last of all, they were followed by Moses, still holding up his staff above his head, heading to the safety of the opposite shore.

As Moses neared the opposite bank, the pillar of cloud suddenly lifted, and the Egyptian army poured into the breach, their horses and chariots racing across the sea bed toward the retreating Moses and the people already safely gathered on the opposite bank. Soon, most of the chariots of the Egyptian army were in the sea bed, racing in pursuit to the opposite bank. Moses clambered up the bank to safety, turned around to face the rushing army – and lowered his staff! The wind immediately stopped. The waters banked on either side of the sea came crashing in. And the Egyptian army was drowned!

The people of Israel celebrated that night! They danced and feasted and sang, for their captors were now conquered and all threat of retaliation was now gone. They sang, “Yahweh has triumphed gloriously. Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Reed Sea. They were cast down into the depths like a stone. Your right hand, O Yahweh, shattered the enemy. Your right hand, O Yahweh, is glorious in power” (15:1, 4-6).

This experience was the capstone of the far-reaching events which had set Israel free. These experiences had shown, beyond all doubt, that Yahweh was the Israelite God, that he had power over all of nature and history, and could control both at will. The deliverance at the Reed Sea was the final proof that Yahweh loved the Hebrews and had chosen them to be his people. From this time forward, the Exodus stories would remind the people of God's saving acts which had freed them from slavery, conquered the forces of nature and welded them into a nation.

But after victory came Israel's appointed meeting with God. Moses had said to Pharaoh, “Let my people go that they may worship me in the wilderness” (5:1). He had not said that Pharaoh was to let Israel go free in order for them to permanently extricate themselves from Egypt and to form a new nation (although both did happen). Rather, he had told Pharaoh that Israel needed to be set free “so that they may worship me in the wilderness”. And that is exactly what they now set themselves to do. The next morning, safe on the desert side of the Reed Sea and rid of Egypt, Israel now broke camp and followed Moses out into the desert, heading toward Mount Sinai. There, they were to worship Yahweh and learn from him what they were next to do. So now they were on their way to Mount Sinai, and a new chapter in their national life had now begun.

But the story of Israel's deliverance at the Reed Sea cannot be completely ended without one more story. Hundreds and even thousands of years later, Jewish rabbis and teachers told stories about the Bible's stories that furthered nuanced those biblical stories. Of course, the story of Israel's deliverance at the Reed Sea was no exception. The story the later rabbis told was this:

"After the Israelites were rescued from Pharaoh at the sea of reeds, the angels in heaven celebrated and rejoiced at God's rescue of the Hebrew people. But then they noticed that God was crying. "Why are you crying, God?" they admonished Yahweh. "You and your people have just won a great victory."

"I am crying," God responded, "because the Egyptians are my people, too!"

**Psalm 114** deals with a celebration of the Exodus. It begins, "When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion" (114:1-2). Israel departed from Egypt in order to become in their person, as a nation, the sanctuary or dwelling-place of God. But the author doesn't develop the point that Israel is the abode of God. Instead, he continues to focus on how God delivered Israel.

The remainder of Psalm 114 describes the overwhelming ways God acted to protect Israel in the wilderness and to bring them to the Promised Land. "The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. Why is it, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back? O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills, like lambs? Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rocks into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water" (vss. 3-8).

God delivered Israel at the Red Sea (vss. 3, 5) by parting the waters. He brought a great earthquake upon them at the time of the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (vss. 4, 6-7). God gave them water from a rock to sustain them in their wilderness wanderings (vs. 8). And, finally, he parted the waters of the Jordan River to bring them into their promised land (vs. 5b). And all this, God did in order to sustain Israel in their pilgrimage and to bring them to his best intentions for them.

And what about us? Has not God worked equally miraculously in our lives and in our corporate history to bring us to God's place for us?

**Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21** is the poetic telling of the story of Israel's rescue at the Reed Sea. Exodus 14 is prose – the telling of a most compelling story. Exodus 15, on the other hand, is poetry, telling the same story in poetic mode. The Exodus 15 passage goes further than Exodus 14, in that it not only tells the story of Israel's rescue at the Red Sea (vss. 1-6), but also continues to tell of God's cosmic conquering of Amon-Re, the chief Egyptian deity incarnated in Pharaoh (vss. 7-11), and then concludes with telling of God's blessing of Israel's conquest of the Promised Land (vss. 12-17), the eventual taking of Jerusalem as the nation's capital city and the establishment of the Temple. Thus, Exodus 15 brings the mighty works of God to their appropriate conclusion (i.e., God rescued Israel at the Red Sea, not to see them later perish in the

wilderness but to both regain the land of their ancestors, create a capital city, and finally enshrine Yahweh in God's throne room – the Temple). Appropriately, therefore, the poem ends with the words of both worship and of political intentions, “The Lord will reign forever and ever”!

The poem is profound, not only in its story telling (which is important, in and of itself), but in both its political interpretation of God's action, and its perception of the cosmic dimensions of that action. First, the poem is grounded in God's political intentions. God is seen as the mightiest of warriors, the undefeatable general of his people. The poem declares, “The Lord has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea (vs. 1a); the Lord is a warrior (vs. 3); your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power – your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy” (vs. 6; also see vss. 7-10). It is intriguing that the defeat of Egypt was not the doing of the liberated slaves; they were running for their lives! The defeat of Egypt was entirely God's action; he is the warrior *par excellence* who single-handedly destroys Egypt's military prowess.

But God, as political leader, is more than consummate warrior. He is also a compassionate monarch who works for the political justice, compensation of the weak, equitable distribution of wealth and the good of the entire nation. Thus, the poem declares, “in your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed (vs. 13), “you brought them in and planted them on the mountains of your possession, the place, O Lord, you made your abode” (vs. 17). The other nations look in jealousy upon God's particular protection and care for Israel (vss. 14-16). In fact, the author of this poem uses the richest possible language to talk of God's commitment to and treatment of the Israelites; he uses the word “*chesedh*” (“steadfast love”) to indicate God's singular commitment to Israel (see the commentary on “*chesedh*” in Psalm 136).

What is being described in Exodus 15 is the acting out of God's intentions for society – the creation of a relational culture of justice, equity, stewardship of its resources and being at-one with each other and with God. God's intentions for the world was symbolized in a Garden of Eden, was acted out in God's covenants with Noah and with Abraham, and is now being realized in God's saving acts of the Israelites that lead up to Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments. It is, therefore, a profoundly political poem – if politics is understood as the means by which we order our life together.

But this poem is also cosmic in nature. It is not only that God conquers Pharaoh, but also conquers the Sea (“Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone” [vss. 4-5]; “At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea” [vs. 8]; “You blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters” [10].) This preoccupation with God's manipulation of the Sea is particularly significant for all people of the two millennia before Christ. To them, large bodies of water symbolized chaos, and the apparently bottomless and dangerous ocean was the epitome of Chaos. It is significant that the author describes the body of water in which Egypt was defeated as the greatest of oceans. That is done in order to insist upon the cosmic power of Yahweh, for God is proclaimed as superior not only to the Pharaoh and his army, not only to the Egyptian god Amon-Re, but is superior to all the gods – for Yahweh alone can manipulate and use the waters of eternal Chaos for his own purposes! This, clearly, is the only god in whom to place your trust!

This, then, is this majestic poem – a poem that goes far beyond the story of the parting of the Red Sea told in Exodus 14. For this poem argues that the action of Israel’s rescue at the Red Sea was not simply the rescue of one people from another nation’s murderous intent, but was a parable, a symbol of the action of the God whom Israel worships – a God who can transform political realities in order to create peoples who can live in relationship with Him and with each other in the ways that God intends them to live, a God who can tame even the Chaos and can order it into the kind of world that God would create and maintain for us all.

**Matthew 18:21-35** is a continuation of the Gospel lesson examined last Sunday. In that lesson, Jesus dealt with how the church ought to deal with one of their membership who is now withdrawing from the m. If one from this community abandons the church because he or she has been lured away by the unilateral power, greed or need to dominate of the world’s elite systems, the obligation of those who follow Christ is to become dogged in winning that person back. The very fact that he or she once embraced Jesus and Jesus’ community is an indication that there once was a spark there for God’s intentions for the world. We must thus refuse to allow that spark to be stamped out, but will bend every effort to rekindle it and return that person in triumph to the fold. For “it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost” (vs. 14).

The means to return such a stray to the fold is a series of actions, measured, temperate, but steadily escalating and all designed to lead to the targeted person’s redemption and restoration. If every action unhappily fails – no matter how patient and single-focused the church has been, then that person has chosen to abandon the church and its mission. But the church can never abandon him or her! And that is because this person is a brother or sister, “another member of the church”. This is the “tough love” with which we are to treat each other!

It is in the light of this teaching that Peter then responds to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times” (18:21)? Jesus responds, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (vs. 22)!

Jesus had just finished stressing that the church should be relentless in its effort to reach its members who have abandoned the church, and not to give up on them. Peter is seeking to concretize that insight. “So how often should I forgive someone who keeps on wronging the church or the gospel? How often should I forgive one who keeps yielding to the dominating priorities of the structures and values of this world? Seven times?”

Peter thinks he is being generous to a fault. He hasn’t selected the number “seven” out of thin air. The Pharisees at the time of Jesus taught that one should forgive a person who is breaking the Law of Moses a total of three times; it was only upon the fourth offense that the person should be ostracized from Israel. That number came from their interpretation of Amos 1:3 (also see Amos 1:6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6), “for three transgressions and for four, I will not revoke the punishment”. In other words, the Pharisees interpreted this text, if a person breaks the Law three times, he is to be forgiven. But if he breaks it a fourth time, then he is to be cast out of Israel.

Peter, therefore, thinks that he is being extremely – even extravagantly generous. How often should Christians forgive a brother or sister member of the church who rejects the community in favor of embracing the lust for power, greed or domination of the world? The prophet says, “forgive him three times.” Should we, following your instructions, forgive him three times twice over – and then add one more? How is that for amazing generosity, forgiveness and love on our part? Peter is quite proud of himself for his suggestion.

But then Jesus utterly deflates Peter’s pomposity. “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times” – or, in other words, endlessly! There is never a time when one must stop forgiving. One must simply keep on forgiving eternally.

In reality, what Jesus was doing here was reversing Lamech’s revenge that was well known in first-century Judaism. Lamech was the grandson of Cain. Lamech received an insult from a man, and in a fit of rage and revenge, killed the man for the insult. Boasting of his accomplishment to his wives, he stated, “If Cain is avenged sevenfold (for his killing of his brother, Abel – see Gen. 4:15), then Lamech’s is seventy-seven fold” (Gen. 4:24). Jesus is now intentionally reversing Lamech’s revenge. If Lamech could participate in unlimited revenge, then Jesus and his disciples are to participate in unlimited forgiveness!

Jesus wants Peter and his followers to understand not only the extent of forgiveness that the Christian community should exercise in its efforts to keep anyone from being seduced away by the systems and priorities of this world and its elite. They need to understand the depth of that forgiveness, as well. Therefore, Jesus follows up his response to Peter by telling his disciples the Parable of the Forgiving King and the Unforgiving Servant.

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children, and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him his debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe’. Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (18:23-35).

This, of course, is a parable about the extent and depth of forgiveness that should be exercised by the Christian community. Jesus begins the parable with the words, “The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves” (vs. 23). He is in essence saying, “Here is how we do business in the kingdom of heaven – in the communion of

saints”. There is a place in the church for divine mercy. And there is a place for divine judgment. And being able to tell the one from the other is of critical importance.

As the story develops, it becomes clear that Jesus wants to build the greatest of contrasts between the debt of the slave upon whom the king shows mercy, and the debt of the other slave that the first slave is unwilling to forgive. The parable tells us that the slave’s debt owed the king was “ten thousand talents”. That was a figure impossible for the average person, hearing this parable, to get his head around. A single talent was worth 6,000 denarii. So ten thousand talents was 60 million denarii. This was a sum greater than the national debt of the Roman Empire. So it would be comparable to saying that a single person owed more money than the national debt of the United States! It’s beyond imagination! And, obviously, there is no way that a person could ever pay off such a debt!

In comparison, the debt that the second slave owed to this slave was small. It was only 100 denarii. That amounted to about four months wages for manual labor. A debt comparable to an average wage for four months was substantial enough. But it was as nothing next to the debt of the first slave.

So the first slave owed this astronomical debt to the king – a debt that simply could not be liquidated, no matter what the slave might do. The king, therefore, was within his legal rights to order him “to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions”. The phrase, “and payment to be made” that concludes this sentence meant that whatever money that would be generated by the sale of the man, his wife, his children and his possessions would be applied against that debt. But there would be no hope for the king to ever receive full payment for the debt.

The king was within his legal rights to sell the man, his family and his possessions in order to obtain at least partial payment. But for the king to have executed this decision would have meant total ruin for this man. So the man begged the king to have patience while the man bent himself to repay the debt. Well, there was no way this man – or any man (even the Roman emperor) – could ever generate 600 million denarii (never mind the interest). But the king takes mercy on the man anyway, releases him “and forgave him the debt”. Now, note the dynamic that occurred here. The slave asked the king for patience and the chance to repay the debt. The king gave to that slave amnesty and complete forgiveness of the man’s debt. ***This*** is what it means to “forgive seventy-seven times”!

A further insight needs to be observed in this parable. By forgiving the slave his immense debt, the king showed himself to be a true follower of the Deuteronomic code. The book of Deuteronomy comes closest of any biblical book to being a constitution of the nation of Israel. It legislates what the respective roles of the king (the political system), the nobles and officials (the economic system) and the priests (the religious system) are to be. The king is particularly enjoined to be about justice and equity for the people (Deut. 16:18-20; 17:14-20), so that “justice, and only justice, you shall pursue” (16:20a). Justice, not only in Deuteronomy but throughout the Old Testament, was both political and economic and was centered not only upon treating everyone equally before the Law but in being compassionate toward those who were powerless or in impossible economic situations (e.g., Deut. 15:4-11; 26:12-15). Chief among the



legislative actions that Deuteronomy requires both for the king and for all who are wealthy is the forgiving of all debts owed them every seven years (the “Sabbatical Year” – Deut. 15:1-2; Lev. 25:25-37) and charging no interest on loans all the time (Deut. 23:19-20). These regulations were well known to all Israelites at the time of Jesus, even though none of Israel’s elite paid any attention to these laws at all. But hearing what this king did for this slave so hopelessly in debt would have told Jesus’ hearers that here, at least, was one king who was obediently obeying all the laws of the Sabbatical Year and of the Jubilee!

After receiving such gracious forgiveness, the subsequent actions of this slave are both reprehensible and unforgiveable. Assaulting another slave who owed him the paltry sum of 100 denarii, this forgiven slave has the man thrown into debtor’s prison until he has found the money to pay him in full. Although he himself is forgiven, there is no room in him for forgiveness for others.

Hearing what this forgiven slave has done, other slaves go to the king and report his actions. The king is enraged, calls the forgiven slave into his presence, upbraids him for what he has done, and then reconstitutes the punishment. The king declares sentence by stating, “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” He then reinstates the debt and throws him into prison “until he would pay his entire debt” – which, of course, will never happen!

There is an intriguing word that Jesus uses to describe the state of the other slaves that report that forgiven slave’s actions to the king. The NRSV states that they “were greatly distressed” (vs. 31). The Greek word actually used there, *lype* is best translated “sorrow”. The slaves were “greatly sorrowed”! Although the king is later “angered” (vs. 34), the slaves are “sorrowed”. The two words capture an unusual nuance of the nature of both anger and sorrow as a motivating force for action. The Norse word *angor* from which our English word “anger” comes doesn’t mean “rage” or “indignation” (which our English word means), but rather “grief”! It is a recognition that authentic, constructive anger comes not out of fury for injustice being done, but out of the most profound sorrow and grief that people can be treated this way. It is the breaking of a person’s heart by the human actions that break God’s heart! Thus, by the way Jesus has chosen to use words here, he is conveying the idea, not so much of rage against this servant, as the most profound grief that one human being would treat another human being this way!

Further, this interplay of words which Jesus used to describe the responses of both the brother/sister slaves and the king to the actions of this slave who had received so great a forgiveness and yet was so thoroughly unforgiving (and greedy) toward his fellow slave suggests something else. It suggests why discipline is absolutely essential to the formation of the church or of any other society. It is magnificently stated by Dale Bruner:

“If the servants had *not* reported this unconscionable incident to their lord, they would have practiced a foolish “love” to the heartless sinner and no love at all to the one sinned against. Some kind of Christian discipline must go into action in flagrant cases, and in all such cases looking the other way cannot pretend to be love. An undisciplining Christian community is

finally an unloving community. Jesus' "Judge not", misapplied, can be only a cover for cowardice".<sup>1</sup>

With this parable, Jesus has completed his teaching on the places of forgiveness and discipline within the Christian community. Both are absolutely essential for the effective formation and sustenance of a community. But at the heart of the exercise of these two community elements, there must be the overriding commitment to the redemption of both the people and the systems – even though, most often, that will be betrayed. The offender/offended, whether person or system, may choose to give up on the church. But the church should never give up on them or it. And both discipline and forgiveness are twin actions that seek the restoration and ultimate transformation of that person or that system.

What is particularly unique in this parable is the reversal of roles that Jesus builds into its telling. The king, who is the personification of the political system, acts in a Deuteronomic manner. He is acting justly and even compensatorially, in that he forgives the servant his overwhelming debt. On the other hand, the peasant acts like the dominating system. He has so absorbed the standards of that system that he has become as vicious and as evil as the system itself – perhaps even worse! So he seeks to be overwhelmingly controlling and greedy. And in so doing, he brings the wrath of the system down upon him.

Thus, Jesus is saying that the people imitate the standards of the systems at their own peril, because they will become possessed by those standards and will be judged accordingly. On the other hand, systems can act in very liberating and forgiving ways, and when they do so, they transform all of their society. Thus forgiveness is salvific both for people and for systems. And greed and refusal to forgive is destructive of everyone.

**Romans 14:1-12** deals with Paul's effort to resolve some conflicts within the Church of Rome. But in addressing these conflicts, Paul sets out some basic principles that can be used in dealing with any church conflict.

There are several conflicts in which members of the church in Rome are entwined. One such conflict is the food that they eat and wine that they drink (14:1-4). That conflict was being fought on two levels. The first conflict was between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, and dealt with the dietary requirements of the Jews. Should all Christians be required to obey those requirements (e.g., eating no pork, shellfish or other foods considered unclean)? The second dealt with food offered to idols. If one were to buy quality meats and wines, one would have to buy food that had been offered to idols. That is, it would be the healthiest, strongest and unblemished animals that would be offered as sacrifices in Rome's temples to the Roman, Greek and Egyptian gods; those temples were slaughter-houses as much as they were places of worship. It would only be blemished and inferior meats that would be sold on the open market. It was likewise true for wine. The issue for Christians was whether, by eating meat or drinking wine offered in pagan worship, one was contaminating and thus corrupting one's self by appearing to bear allegiance to the gods for whom those goods were sacrificed?

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<sup>1</sup> F. Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 239-240.

The other major conflict had to do with the celebration of certain festive days (vss. 5-6). Should Christians observe national patriotic days of Rome? After all, their loyalty was to be to another emperor – Jesus, not Caesar. Likewise, should Christians celebrate religious days of other religions – most notably of Judaism? Should they continue to keep the Sabbath? Should they switch the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, in order to celebrate the day Jesus rose from the dead? Should they observe Passover, the Festival of First Fruits or other Jewish holy days?

Paul's response in verses 1-6 is very direct; he, in essence, says "a pox on both your houses"! Stop majoring on minors, he argues. Your task is to be reaching Rome with the good news of Jesus Christ, and working for Rome's transformation into the City of God. Your arguing is only dissipating that effort and is turning your attention inward to divert you from your primary mission. Don't allow the Enemy to fool you so! Instead, create a spirit of openness and receptivity to differing ideas in your church. If there are those who wish to observe certain dietary restrictions, let them! If there are those who want to eat meat offered to idols, let them! If there are those who feel they should abstain from such food, let them! If there are those who want to celebrate Passover, let them! If there are those who wish to treat each day as the same, let them! Stop majoring on minors. Learn to accept one another and one another's peculiar habits and beliefs. Make room for diversity. And keep your eyes on the prize, not on the issue of the moment!

When I was a student studying for the ministry in seminary, I asked our church history professor what was the greatest lesson he learned from church history. I have never forgotten his answer. He responded, "The one continuing lesson for me from church history is that, throughout its entire existence, the church has consistently made its last ditch stands in the wrong ditches!" Stop majoring in minors, and remained focused on "staying the course".

And what is that "course" which we are supposed to remain focused upon? Paul tells us in this passage. "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living" (vss. 7-9).

There is no such thing as a "Christian", Paul states in this passage. There are only "Christians" – a community of faith. It is impossible for any of us to live a truly isolated life. That which makes us human beings and not simply animals is each other, and our interaction with each other. And that which makes us increasingly Christian is our commitment to, relationship with and tolerance of each other. No one can disentangle one's self from each other or from God.

Neither can any human being disentangle himself or herself from Jesus Christ. As the ancient saying puts it, "Bidden or unbidden, God is always here". Even if you refuse to become a Christian, all that Christ was and is and will be stands before you and engages you. You may not choose to embrace the spirit, values and call of Christ, but God will go on embracing you. You may choose to ignore all that Christ stands for, but Christ will not ignore you. Not even death will separate you from the reality of Christ, for Christ is still there! "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord." "Bidden or unbidden, God is always there".

Therefore, because we who call ourselves Christian are already a community in Christ, we must make room in that community for all kinds of strange creatures who are not like us in belief, conviction and action. We can't live our lives placing our agendas down upon other people, no matter how firmly we might hold those beliefs. Rather, we must embrace each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, "warts and all", and center our life and work on strengthening our community together and working in the world to bring the world increasingly into embracing that community, as well.

In the final analysis, what Paul is reminding every Christian is that we can't assume responsibility for any other Christian. We can be concerned about them, we can pray for them, we can urge them to stay focused on God's call to them. But we can't assume responsibility for them. They must assume responsibility for themselves. The Iron Rule for the empowering of people applies every bit as well to Christian life and growth: "Never do for others what they can do for themselves!" "So then," Paul concludes, "each of us will be accountable to God" (vs. 12)! And each of us must assume responsibility for our own beliefs, convictions and actions while living the Christ-like life before the world.

The single mission upon which the whole church should be fixed was beautifully expressed by Clement of Rome (bishop of the church in Rome from 92 to 101 AD) in his prayer, "We beg you, Master, be our help and strength. Save those who are oppressed, have pity on the lowly, and lift up the fallen. Heal the sick, bring back the straying, and feed the hungry. Release those in prison, lift up those who falter, and strengthen the fainthearted. Let all nations come to know you the one God, with your Son, Jesus Christ, and us your people and the sheep of your pasture. Amen."<sup>2</sup> And it is this work upon which the church should be focused!

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<sup>2</sup> Clement of Rome, "Prayer for the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time", *Ancient Christian Devotional*, edited by Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), p. 209.