

October 2, 2011

SCRIPTURE:

Hebrew Bible: Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20  
Epistle: Philippians 3: 4b-14  
Gospel: Matthew 21: 33-46

MEDITATION

Risk of Transformation

Transformation of any kind is not easy and transformation of any kind is ALWAYS risky. We humans seem to like to keep things “the way they always were”! But life itself is always a shifty mirage in front of us, and change keeps happening whether we like it or not. We might think we have it all “RIGHT” and then something comes along to challenge us and our way of thinking and being. And mostly we don’t like that. My husband who endured many years of stressful law practice use to say “Most people would rather be RIGHT than HAPPY. I believe there is wisdom in that analysis. Even if it doesn’t make us happy or bring us peace we would rather it be our way, the RIGHT WAY. And sometimes our insistence on that can indeed make us into very unhappy people ourselves and create unhappiness for those around us. We need to transform that way of being if it is tripping us up and that will take risk. We have to risk that we really CAN be something different! And we need to BELIEVE that transformation is possible.

Today is World Wide Communion and Christians all over the globe are celebrating communion as a sign of our unity in Christ. We gather symbolically at a common table, we are encouraged to acknowledge each others presence at this common table and affirm for each other that Christ is among us. A little known fact to most of us is that not everyone, not all denominations, participate in the celebration of this day. We want to be ONE, we want to sing that song and have it be true, but the reality is that it is on going work for Christians all over the world to attain this ONENESS. We are divided by our understandings, our differing theologies and our interpretations of the scriptures and the rules that we believe to be important. Even within our own denomination and our individual communities of faith we are not all like minded. And on a personal, individual level we are sometimes, maybe even often, fractured and divided with our own beings. We want to be one but we are often not. That is why on this special day, it is important for us to REMEMBER with all our being what it is we are doing when we come to this table.

It has always surprised me at one level that it is on this day of world wide wonder and awe at the table of Jesus, that we first are turned toward the RULES, the common law of the TEN COMMANDMENTS. Rules placed before mystery!! The reading in Exodus is given to us as a kind of condensed version, we leave out the “nasty bits” (verse 5-6) VERY HARD FOR US IN OUR TIME AND PLACE IN HISTORY AND we might not want to grapple with and the long parts of extensive explanation, JUST GETTING ON WITH THE BOTTOM LINE. What is the rule? And then what am I going to do with it? That is the part about transformation.

For some, religion and faithfulness is primarily about keeping “rules” about obeying a lot of “Thou shalt nots”. For those who grew their faith experience in a conservative environment, where all manner of things were prohibited (cards, dancing, alcohol, etc.) on the basis of “religious beliefs” the conclusion seems almost unavoidable. It may be a bit of a leap, for these people, to get to the point of understanding law as a “gift” from God. God gives the law not for God’s benefit but for the benefit of the people. They have been in a tough spot – slaves in Egypt and wandering in the wilderness without food and water. Under the stress they are breaking down, acting inappropriately, hurting each other in their fear and anxiety. It might help us to recognize that we often do the same thing and God’s gift of RULES is meant to help us rather than control us. The laws are a gift of love not a means of us deciding who has them right and who has them wrong.

The first four commandments focus on our relationship with God. The last six focus on our relationship with each other and form the basis of our legal system. At least that was what we believe was the intent of our forefathers who had them as their focus as the legal system evolved. Some might wonder at that now. These six rules are meant to be “freeing” in that they “free” or “save” us from some of the nastiness that would typify life if we didn’t live them. Ideally, obedience and faithfulness develop as a response to and mirror of the faithfulness of God, as illustrated in the story of the Exodus and as we experience it in our own lives. We obey ideally out of a response to God’s great love for us and a desire that we should live together as God would have us live. It isn’t easy, it is always complicated but it is that TRANSFORMATION that we desire as Christian community.

Paul has to be the greatest example of transformation in the Christian faith. He was a very determined “rule” follower who did a lot of damage to the Christian community before his conversion. Here is the complexity personified. He used to be known as Saul, and he thought he was very important just because he was a member of the people of Israel. He belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. He was a lawyer. He had a good life and had all the things he wanted. But he was not too happy with Christians because they were new and different. So Saul tried very hard to make Christians miserable. It was only God’s love that caused a miracle of conversion to change Saul from whom he was to Paul. He became a Christian, and suddenly all the things he thought were important were not important anymore. It did not matter where he was born, which tribe he belonged to, how much money he had, how others saw him, or that he was a lawyer. The only thing that was important to him was that he knew Jesus. That was so important that nothing else mattered. He had never been so happy in his life. And he tried to encourage others to know Jesus. He traveled, he spoke, he wrote to the people and the rules that were once so important to him although not forgotten were transformed. Love can and does transform the rigidity of rules. And the rigidity of our thinking we are RIGHT. There is that mystery and that awe again! We must remember that as we come to this holy table! AMEN