

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Exodus 12:1-14

^{12:1} The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ² This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³ Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴ If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵ Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶ You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷ They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸ They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹ Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰ You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹ This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. ¹² For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴ This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Commentary

Jews, Christians and Muslims ground their faith in the acts of God in history. This lection from Exodus is about the Passover – both as the original event, and as the model for celebration in the future. In order to be saved from the final plague, the community is to follow specific instructions. Verses 12-13 connect the blood with the Exodus – the angel of death would “pass over” the houses marked by the blood of a lamb. This helps explain why the early Jewish

Christians, steeped in this kind of symbolism, would speak of Jesus' saving power as "the blood of the lamb." Memory and ritual are at the heart of our faith as Christians.

Reflection

What rituals and celebrations keep the memory of our faith alive? Which are most meaningful to you?

Romans 13:8-14

^{13:8} Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. ¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Commentary

The context of this lection is the question of obligations to the state: issues like paying taxes, doing military service, and respecting officials. Paul says, essentially, not to get into a position where you owe anything to anyone. Get rid of all those debts the old-fashioned way: pay them! The one debt we can never fully discharge, though, is the obligation to love. Even when we have taken care of all of our other obligations, we still owe our neighbors love. Love is a gift of God's grace – it is not something we grit our teeth and resolve to accomplish, like loving a grumpy co-worker. "We love because God first loved us." Christians belong to a new order, one with an obligation to spread God's love throughout the whole world.

Reflection

How well do we love our neighbors? What does "loving a neighbor" look like, in concrete terms? How can the commandment to love one another become a blessing in YOUR life?

Matthew 18:15-20

^{18:15} "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the

evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Commentary

These verses are part of what has been called the "sermon on the church," a section dealing with how the Christian community conducts its life. It is based on Jesus' teachings, but reflects the needs of Matthew's church, and their need for direction in congregational life. How should the church deal with unrepentant sinners in its midst? We don't know what the particular offenses in question were, but the Gospel offers practical steps for dealing with this problem. First, have a private conversation. Second, if that doesn't work to bring the sinner around, take along some members of the church. Finally, if THAT doesn't succeed, take the issue before the whole congregation. Accountability is the issue in question here, along with mutual love.

Reflection

How do we deal with sin in the church? Boldly but lovingly? Or do we try to ignore it? If so, why do you think that is?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 149

^{149:1} Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful.

² **Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.**

³ Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.

⁴ **For the LORD takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory.**

⁵ Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches.

⁶ **Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands,**

⁷ to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples,

⁸ **to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron,**

⁹ to execute on them the judgment decreed. This is glory for all his faithful ones.

Praise the LORD!

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.