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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, September 17, 2023

Proper 19, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary Track 1

[Exodus 14:19-31](#)

[Psalm 114](#)

[Romans 14:1-12](#)

[Matthew 18:21-35](#)

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There's a rabbinic story, like so many of those rabbinic stories that expand on the texts of scripture, that imagines the Israelites after the crossing of the sea, safe and free, seeing their oppressors the Egyptians dead on the seashore, and beginning to dance and sing the great song of Miriam and Moses that we sing at the Great Vigil of Easter: "I will sing to the LORD who is lofty and uplifted, who has hurled horse and rider into the sea." And, the story goes, the angels in heaven were watching this, and began to shout and dance and join in the song. But God stopped them, saying, "How can you sing for joy when my children are lying dead on the seashore?"

It's as if to say: the Israelites had the right to sing and dance at the triumph over their enemies; but from the vantage point of heaven, the enemies matter too.

And yet of course this is a tradition that arises precisely from the Jewish people themselves, an expression of a kind of deep respect for human beings as God's creation that lies at the heart of that great faith that is the older sibling of our own and from whom we derive so much of our understanding of who God is and who human beings are: a respect that can be found also in every great faith tradition at its best: a deep sense of the humanity even of the enemy, even of the oppressor; a refusal to give up ultimately even on them; a hope that they, even they, might be redeemed. An impulse toward reconciliation; toward forgiveness.

It's not hard to find examples of the opposite path. This week we have marked the anniversaries of two great acts of hatred. Monday was the twenty-second anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when nineteen men steeped in hatred and bent on what they believed was revenge committed a horrific act of murder and destruction by crashing airplanes into buildings full of God's children. Friday was the sixtieth anniversary of the terrorist attack of September 15, 1963, when a group of Klan members steeped in hatred and bent on maintaining white supremacy planted dynamite under the steps of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and the explosion shortly before Sunday services were supposed to start killed four young Black girls. The theme for that morning's Sunday school class and the sermon the pastor had been planning to preach was "A Love that Forgives."

The ways we hate and kill one another are so many. And the urge to retaliate runs so deep—maybe as deep as the beginnings of humanity. The book of Genesis includes a powerful mythological picture of how violence enters the world in the story of Cain and Abel. When Cain believes God is favoring Abel over him, he attacks and kills his brother—the first act of murder. God sends Cain into exile, yet grants him a kind of mercy in the form of a guarantee of protection: anyone who kills Cain, the story says, will suffer vengeance sevenfold.

There's a lesser-known follow-up to that story. A few verses later, as Genesis describes the descendants of Cain, we meet Cain's great-great-great-grandson, a man named Lamech. And in a kind of macho, posturing song, Lamech boasts of having killed someone who attacked him. "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, Lamech indeed is avenged seventy-sevenfold."

It's as if to say: look at what violence does. This one foundational act of murder multiplies down the generations: one, seven, seventy-seven. It reminds me of an image I've spoken about before: imagine a small crack in a car's windshield. It starts out as just a single tiny ding; but if left unrepaired, it begins to spread and fan out in all directions until an expanding spiral web fractures the entire surface of the windshield. A cycle of violence and retribution, hatred and hatred in return, righteous anger for genuine injury transformed into nurtured grievance and perpetuated down through lives and generations and centuries.

We have to know this story of Cain and Lamech if we're to make any sense of Jesus' words today. For Jesus too is a rabbi, a trained student of the scriptures. And when he speaks to Peter of forgiveness in terms of seven and seventy-seven, he's not just coming up with a random, big-sounding number. He is pointing us back to this foundational story from the Torah, this origin story of human violence and retaliation, the crack in the windshield. And he is saying: we are going to repair the crack. We are going to undo the violence. Imagine taking a video of that spiraling, spreading crack in the glass and playing it backward, watching the fractures knit together from the outside in until even that first imperceptible break is healed. We are going to reverse the spiral, Jesus is saying, with an exponential movement of healing that is more powerful than that first exponential breaking-out of violence. And this healing, this repairing of the breach, is God's dream for the world, a dream that goes back farther than Cain, farther than hatred.

Sometimes that repairing of the breach can begin with a single, simple act of attention and empathy. Sammy Rangel is an acclaimed speaker and author on the topic of forgiveness. But his life began very differently. He grew up in a home filled with brutal abuse: physical, sexual, emotional. By age eleven he had attempted suicide, begun using cocaine, and joined a Puerto Rican gang, the Maniac Latin Disciples. He watched as his gang leader murdered a man in front of him. He soon began participating in violent crimes himself. At seventeen he was sent to prison, where he saw a white guard shoot a Black prisoner and emerged even more radicalized and committed to racial violence.

He describes himself as “a brutal leader with a killer mentality, more animal than man.”¹ He went to prison again, where one day he met a therapist named George.

¹ “Sammy Rangel,” <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/sammy-rangel/>.

George asked Sammy about his story. He listened to him. He said a few words that Sammy would remember: “I can see that you’ve been suffering.”

Later Sammy would say, “Dude, that broke me. That broke through the chain mail. In an instant I went from feeling self-pity to feeling remorse. In fact it was the first time I’d experienced empathy.”² Soon he went into recovery for addiction, then embarked on a personal journey of working to come to a place of forgiveness for his mother for the ways she had abused him as a child, and seeking in turn to make amends with the daughter and son he had abandoned. He completed a master’s in social work and went on to co-found Life After Hate, a nonprofit that accompanies people who are emerging from violent extremism.

Sammy Rangel chose to reverse the cycle of violence. To begin to repair the breach and pursue the work of healing. He is one of many. As friends of Jesus this is our calling too. In small ways and large, starting in our own lives, we can choose to pursue healing over revenge, restoration over retribution, in ways that will radiate outward; exponentially; seven times; seventy-seven times; and more.

² Zaid Jilani, “Radicalization rehab: A group helping people escape hate,” *NewsNation* (May 20, 2022), <https://www.newsnationnow.com/solutions/radicalization-rehab-life-after-hate-extremists-white-nationalists-reform/>.