

“To Cancel or To Connect?”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Exodus 12:1-14
Matthew 18:15-20

Happy Labor Day Weekend, everyone! I hope you each have the chance to rest from your labors, whatever they may be, and spend time with your family, or doing something you love, or doing something to serve or otherwise connect with your community. These days, Labor Day is a day you think about what you might prepare for a cookout, perhaps. We feel so far removed from the conditions that led to the birth of the labor movement over 135 years ago: protests erupting into chaos and even violence in the streets; a workday that would often extend 12 hours or later a day; and the exploitation of child labor.

Oh, wait... what year is this?

Because it seems that this year, in 2020, tensions have risen with our cities and streets erupting with strife as some lament the lack of justice while others insist on law and order. Many of us who are working from home no longer have the boundary of a typical workday; when our homes become our offices, the line between what is work and what is personal life blurs and it becomes hard to tell which is which. And those are the lucky ones who can work from the safety of their own homes-- many “essential workers” are daily putting their lives at risk to the pandemic so that they can keep groceries stocked, care for the young or the sick, and keep our cities and towns humming along. Beyond that, many are just out of work, period. And as far as the exploitation of child labor...please ignore the 8-year-old appearing on your screen... see again the difficulty in separating what is work life from what is home life.

We do see some of the power of the labor movement at work today. I know in many school districts, teachers have organized their voices to demand a safer workplace for themselves and their students in the face of this pandemic, with varying levels of success. Whether virtual learning or in-person learning is the choice for the children in your lives, please offer your full support to the teachers in your community, because they are being asked to basically walk on water as they try to teach under unprecedented circumstances. They deserve safety. They deserve the resources they need to do their jobs well. They deserve our patience. They deserve fair treatment.

While Matthew does not give a perfect template for negotiations for when people do not understand or agree with each other, it does give better options than what our human tendencies often lead us to do, which is 1) to nurse our grievances, often until they fester, and 2) go behind the other person’s back and gossip about how wrong they are, and 3) figure out

how to cancel them in our relationship and even in their standing in the community-- this is particularly true of our culture today. Matthew nips that in the bud; here Jesus tries to point followers towards connection and reconciliation, instructing listeners to directly bring the fault to the one who has sinned against you rather than go behind their back. They deserve the chance to make things right. Next, if that does not work, bring in others, to hear and moderate. It seems the goal is towards reconciliation-- although one problem in this method is that it assumes that one person is clearly the sinner, while the other one is the righteous one, and "listening" really involves the sinner agreeing with the one who is bringing their complaint. In my experience, conflict in relationships is not always so black and white. Additionally, listening does not always have to mean agreeing; it can mean holding someone else's pain, trying to feel what their shoes are like for a bit, even if you cannot come to full agreement with them. Regardless, verse 18:20 assures us, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." I wonder how our words and attitudes might change in conflict if we considered God as a person at the table talking among us.

God was certainly a presence in the negotiations Moses had with Pharaoh, although this looks much different than the peaceful negotiations Jesus describes in Matthew. Moses' negotiation on behalf of the Hebrew people is perhaps one of the earliest examples of organizing for labor we know of. Their cries for justice and mercy centered around the harsh treatment of their work. Those who fell out of line were beaten, or worse, and as we could see early in Exodus, Pharaoh issued a decree for some time that would require the killing of each Hebrew baby boy.

But God heard their cry and knew their sufferings, and called them to so much better. God sent them Moses to go into negotiations with Pharaoh and demand justice for the Hebrew people. The first thing Moses asks Pharaoh to do for the Hebrews is to just give them a three-day weekend, so they can go into the wilderness for a different kind of cookout: to offer sacrifices and worship the Lord. Not only does Pharaoh deny Moses' request; he ends up giving the Hebrews even harder work. And so, there was a consequence: the rivers turned to blood. Again Moses approached Pharaoh for a negotiation. Yet again, Pharaoh hardened his heart, and so there was a consequence: the next time, frogs. This pattern repeats itself, and the consequences of Pharaoh's hard heart mount up: Gnats. Flies. Disease among the Egyptians' livestock. Boils. Hail and thunderstorm. Locusts. A deep darkness. Each time, Pharaoh clings more deeply to his hold on power, even when it is destroying him and his people.

Finally, one more plague is announced: death of the firstborn to each Egyptian household-- their families, their slaves who aren't Hebrews, and even of their livestock. This is too harsh, some of you may think, and I am right there with you on that. How can this be fair, God taking the lives of so many who were surely innocent, even if they *were* born to the Egyptian oppressors? I don't think I can say anything to smooth over this frightening section, except to say that the writers of Exodus show a symmetry between what Pharaoh tried to do early in Exodus with the Hebrew babies, and later when he gets a taste of his own tyranny. Here is the tragedy that happens when cries for justice are not heard...when negotiations are met with closed hearts and closed ears...when some never get the opportunity to work from within the system to change the

system. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “A riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? ... It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met.” If Exodus were to be written today, perhaps it would say that God *cancelled* the Egyptians. *I am the Lord*, God asserted after announcing the judgment that would fall upon Egypt. In other words, Pharaoh is *not* Lord over you. *I am the Lord*, and I will show Pharaoh that you belong to no one but me. In Black liberation theology, there’s a saying, “If God is my master, then my earthly master isn’t God.”

We are meant to read the story and identify with the struggle of the Hebrews, with Moses, and Miriam his sister, and Aaron his brother. However, what if we are meant to see ourselves in the person of Pharaoh and his hard heart? My colleague Rev. Phil Hobson describes the tendency of the privileged to read scripture with a bad case of what he calls Disney Princess theology. “In Disney Princess Theology, as each individual reads scripture, they see themselves as the princess in every story. They are Esther, never Xerxes or Haman. They are Peter, but never Judas. They are the woman anointing Jesus, but never the Pharisees. They are the Jews escaping slavery in Egypt, but never Egypt. For citizens of the most powerful country in the world, who enslaved both Native and Black people, to see itself as Israel and not Egypt when studying scripture is a perfect example of Disney Princess theology. And it means that as people in power, they have no lens for locating themselves rightly in scripture or theology-- and it has made them blind and utterly ill-equipped to engage issues of power and injustice.”¹

So much of today’s story from Exodus describes the Passover meal. A festival with lamb and unleavened bread, which is so much more than a cookout because the lamb’s blood marked the homes of the Israelites, so that God would pass over them and spare them from death. An important aspect of the Passover meal is that it gets repeated each year, each time retelling the stories of the Hebrew people’s experience in Egypt, its enslavement, its struggle for liberation, and finally its freedom-- and that God brought them through all of it. It connects people to the past, repeating the story so they don’t forget God, the One who heard the Hebrews’ cry for justice and responded with a pathway to liberation. Repeating the story also helps to not forget who Pharaoh was or become like him. Similarly, our Christian Communion meal remembers Jesus and connects him to our long history of belonging to God and with God, and also belonging to one another. Even in the brokenness of conflict-- a conflict that ultimately led Jesus to the cross-- God is in the room, at the table, always pushing us towards our reconciliation, our redemption, and new ways of being together. May that be so today, even as we eat again at this virtual table. Amen.

¹ Phil Hobson is a minister in the United Church of Christ. He serves Mount Sinai Congregational UCC, NY.