

Proper 24, Year A – Exodus 33
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All Saints' Episcopal Church
Teri Daily

Nothing gives us a glimpse of our own parenting like watching our children play with their dolls. I remember one day watching my then two-and-a-half-year-old daughter put her doll in time-out. Emma placed the doll in a small plastic chair and stepped back a couple feet. Then stretching her arms out and assuming an attitude of frustration and disappointment, she said, “I can’t handle this right now. I’m going to leave the room for a couple of minutes, and then I’ll be back.” To be honest, I was a little mortified to see my own parenting mirrored to me like that. But I knew that if Emma’s play parenting had any resemblance to what she experienced with us, then she’d come back in a couple of minutes to give the doll a hug; a moment’s tenderness wouldn’t be long in coming.

I think this time-out regimen represents pretty accurately the general pattern of hurt and reconciliation that we experience in relationships. There is a betrayal of sorts – a hurt – often followed by a consequence. We step away for a second to cool down and to let trust be reestablished – to put things in perspective and start to look forward. After that period of cooling off, we then come back to the table ready to recommit and start again – not necessarily having forgotten what just happened, but willing to pledge ourselves once again to the relationship even in the full knowledge of its imperfection. It is a cycle we see over and over again in the story of scripture. God may become angry and appear to be hidden for a time, but God never completely walks away from Israel, even when Israel herself seems to have abandoned the covenant with God. This is what we see in today’s reading from Exodus.

Moses begs to know that God’s presence will go with the Israelites into the promised land, and so he asks to see God’s glory. It is like a down-payment of sorts. This passage recounts a powerful scene in and of itself, but to understand completely what is going on here requires backing up a little in the story. You may remember from last week that the previous chapter of Exodus finds Moses up on the top of Mt. Sinai receiving the terms of the covenant from God. But while he’s gone, the Israelites grow anxious. Moses takes a long time, and the people need some tangible sign that they are not alone. So they convince Aaron to make a golden calf to worship as their god; after all, it’s something they can actually see and believe.

Hardly have the terms of the covenant come forth from the mouth of God before the relationship is breached – an idol is made and the first commandment broken. There is anger on the part of both God and Moses toward the Israelites. There are consequences – three thousand people die and a plague follows. And then there is the silence of what will come next. On the other side of this incident, what will God’s relationship with Israel be like? There is deafening silence as Israel waits. The Israelites know that they exist as a people only if God is with them. But Israel has broken the covenant – will God still be with them?

At first what takes place is a cautious renegotiation of the relationship. The residual frustration and anger that exists is palpable. God tells Moses: “Go, leave this place, you and the people *you* have brought out of Egypt, and go the land I promised you. I’ll send an angel before you, but I

will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” It is as if God is stepping out of the room for just a moment to cool down, not quite ready to resume the relationship as it was before.

This is where the narrative picks back up in our reading for today. Moses refuses to go anywhere until God comes back into the room, until he gets some reassurance that the relationship between Yahweh and Israel (however devoid of innocence it may now be) remains intact. Moses reminds God of the terms of the relationship: “You’re the one who told me to bring up this people. This is your people. If you’re not going with us, don’t bother taking us to the promised land. Because only if you go with us will we be distinct from all other peoples on the face of the earth.” The Lord acquiesces and agrees to go with the Israelites.

Still it is not enough for Moses. Just like the Israelites grew anxious and needed some physical evidence of God’s presence, Moses too needs a tangible sign. He wants proof of the reconciliation between God and Israel, so he asks to see God’s glory. And in an act of mercy, God does reveal God’s self to Moses, but it’s a limited disclosure. Moses sees the goodness of God, but not God’s face.

Just like Moses, we, too, know that we can’t go it alone. We need some sign of the presence of God in our lives. And just as God’s goodness passed before Moses, God’s goodness is also made apparent to us – the gifts of God surround us. And yet it often doesn’t seem to be enough, especially in the midst of a pandemic. We want more – we want to see God’s face. We want to know that the relationship we have with our creator is strong enough to withstand any breaches of covenant that we might throw its way. We need to know that despite our brokenness and the brokenness of the world, we are not in it alone – that God is still our God, and that we are God’s people. So, how can we see the face of God? Is it even possible?

Scripture gives us at least one answer to this question. In Genesis, there’s a beautiful scene where Jacob and Esau are reconciled after spending years estranged one from the other. And Jacob says to his brother: “to see your face is like seeing the face of God” (Gen 33:11). We know the love and reconciliation we have with God through the love and reconciliation we experience with one another. Perhaps that’s the closest we get in this lifetime to seeing the face of God and to having the reassurance that love is stronger than the wrongs committed against it. This is the reason that we can’t go it alone and why we need each other so very much. This is why we are diminished every time we see the world as an unmitigated dichotomy of red versus blue, liberal versus conservative, us against them of any flavor.

According to our Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer, one of the ministries of lay persons is to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world. That ministry is far-reaching and it will look different for each of us, depending upon the gifts we’ve been given. But perhaps we *begin* participating in Christ’s work of reconciliation by reflecting on those in our own lives with whom we’ve experienced hurt, disappointment, and separation. It is true that some hurts will never be completely healed this side of heaven. But each and every time we strive for reconciliation, we participate in God’s love for the world – a love that is stronger than any breach of covenant, than any wrong committed against it. In short, when we participate in reconciliation, it’s like seeing the face of God.