

Divider of Doubt

Exodus 14:5-31

World Communion Sunday

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One of my favorite comic strips is called “Reverend Fun.” I read it through my computer internet, but perhaps it’s available in print as well (though probably not in any Sunday papers). I love the way it creatively retells or reframes familiar Bible stories, granting interpretations we can really relate to.

As I reflected this week on our Bible passage for this morning, I once again recalled one particular and memorable Reverend Fun published on April 20, 1999. It showed a very authoritative looking Moses, staff in hand, standing before the fully parted Red Sea. Behind him stands a line of Israelites, one of whom holds a sign that reads “Promised Land or Bust.” The drawing makes clear that the line of people is not moving. The blame for this hold-up is one Israelite standing still smack in the middle of the parted wall of waves. As he stands there, Moses speaks directly to him, saying, “I think you have some serious faith issues.” You see, it’s not just that the Israelite is hesitant to cross, it’s that he is standing there wearing swim trunks, a ducky life-preserver, a snorkel, air tank and fins!

What was this guy’s problem? What part of seeing massive walls of water miraculously open up a safe passage for him did he not quite trust? Why, in the presence of such a sight, and in the presence of Moses with his holy staff, did doubt creep across his consciousness and compel him to have a back-up plan? Why did he fear drowning in the very moment of his divine deliverance?

His “serious faith issue” wasn’t anything unusual. We can’t blame this cartoon character. He too closely resembles a truth about ourselves. Our laugh at his less than perfect trust in the miracle of that moment is a knowing laugh -- we all have times when doubts descend on our trust in God’s power to rescue us from whatever is threatening us. Even if we’ve managed to discern that God has opened up a safe passage, it can be hard to step through for fear of the whole thing going wrong and swallowing us whole.

There was a kid back in my high school days who bullied me by shooting open paperclips my way with a rubber band every chance he could. I hadn’t done a thing to him to deserve this! I was just an easy target for someone who needed to pull power-plays in the hallway ... and across the room when the teacher wasn’t looking ... and in

the cafeteria during lunch. Literally, there were few safe passages for me whenever he was around.

Until, that is, God opened up a safe passage around the end of tenth grade. No, the guy didn't move away. And no, I hadn't begun self-defensively unloading clips like Rambo. The passage opened up when I found myself sitting in a guidance department teen support group with him. We were both there because our home lives were messy and unstable. We were both there because though he took to bullying and I took to being bullied, we were both train wrecks waiting to happen. I didn't consider our coming together in that group an act of God back then. These days it's quite clear to me that it was.

In one of those group sessions, we had to partner up for a time of sharing. Any guesses who came up and asked to be my conversation partner? Now being in this group ... with this certified bully ... was one thing, an unexpected dividing of waters of sorts. But going off for some one-on-one time to make friends with the Paper-Clip Creep? That was a whole other stepping out in faith. The pathway to something new was opened, but I wasn't exactly fully trusting that going through was going to be something actually safe.

When poised on the edge of retreating or moving forward, it most often comes down to whether or not you trust the person leading you. This is the person who most has the power to be a *Trumpeter of Turnaround* or a *Divider of Doubt*. Moses was a very unquestionable embodiment of a leader who is a Divider of Doubt. If rubber-ducky guy represents any of the real life Israelites who lived through this great historic event, then those doubting folks were not paying much of any attention to Moses' walking, talking illustration of how to be a sure-footed, faithful-hearted servant leader of God.

Hear again the words he spoke with holy authority when the Egyptian chariots were in hot pursuit, licking the heels of the fleeing Hebrews – “Do not be afraid. Stand firm. See the deliverance that the Lord *will* accomplish today.” (Ex. 14:13) Through Moses' inspirational leadership -- leadership exemplifying outstretched courage and conviction and constant trust in the power behind all liberating miracles – the Israelites indeed passed through the divided waters (and their doubts) to safety on the other side of suffering. Through his example, both the Israelites and the Egyptians came to know the cosmic commander of this epic struggle. They came to know the power and glory of the Lord directly involved in human affairs.

I invite you to recall a time when it felt as if certain trouble was pursuing you or a

loved one; perhaps a time when panic punched your heart and paralyzed you with dripping doubt and dread. How did you manage to advance, to step ahead into and through it? Did you sense it was really God guiding you by way of special person in whom you placed your utmost trust? Someone who convinced you to abandon your rubber-ducky back-up plans in favor of faithfully stepping or swimming ahead into and through the sea of God's amazing grace?

Many of our brothers and sisters in faith near and far are quite literally in the position of the ancient Israelites when they attempted to escape horrendously unjust circumstances. We pray today that they know and trust the many Moses' in their midst, the divine movers who inspire courage, compassion and conviction. The people upon whose hearts are the words "Do not be afraid. Stand firm. See the deliverance that the Lord *will* accomplish today." (Ex. 14:13)

This morning I especially think of a recent letter sent by Clifton Kirkpatrick, the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly, to the United Nations Secretary General. Although it addresses the issue of an epic struggle between people mostly not of Judeo-Christian faith, it nonetheless boldly reflects the spirit of our biblical tradition. It was a letter concerning the current Myanmar crisis.

If you've been following the news, you know that the Myanmar dictatorial government has been once again violently responding to people joining religious leaders in non-violent expressions of their deep desire for an end to economic injustice and inhumanely oppression. Adding to the global outcry, and in appeal to the U.N., Kirkpatrick spoke on behalf of our denomination saying, "As people of faith, we affirm that such uses of force have never quenched the spirit of people who wish to be free." I have no questions about how he can make such a statement. For I know ... you know ... he speaks in the tradition of Moses and the Israelites.

For we who live in the redeeming love of Christ anywhere across this globe, today is a special day to celebrate people who stand firm in faith announcing what the Lord will accomplish. And it is as well a day to experience the dividing of doubts about God's living response to any and all personal and world crises. Today is World Wide Communion Sunday.

This special day was founded in our country in 1936 through the initiative of Presbyterians. It was then adopted more widely in 1940 as a truly international event ... largely as a responsive Christian cry for peace to a world at war. According to a statement from the National Council of Churches USA, "The day has taken on new relevancy and depth of meaning in a world where globalization often has undermined

peace and justice -- and in a time when fear divides the peoples of God's earth. On this day we celebrate our oneness in Christ, the Prince of Peace, in the midst of the world we are called to serve ..."

So in the breaking of bread, and in the parting of grape juice across our tongues, we declare a dividing of any and all doubts about the power of God and the unity of our community of faith. Through it, we stand firm about the miracle of the life we are living, and about all of the ways God continuously opens up opportunities for spiritual and physical peace. It is a meal that nourishes and encourages us to be servant leaders like Jesus, like Moses.

All Christians are invited to this table. Although you are served sitting down, your partaking of the elements is a stepping forward in faith, an acknowledgment that you are part of the Body of the Risen Lord. There is no doubt about it ... this sacrament is a gracious, gracious gift. And so let us join together with brothers and sisters across the globe and with those who have gone ahead to heavenly glory. Let us celebrate our faith and be strengthened for the journeys ahead. Amen.