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“Baptismal Becoming”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 20, 2011

Leviticus 19:1–2, 9–18; Psalm 119:33–40; Matthew 5:38–48

Holy... holy... holy... the poor... the alien... one another... the laborer... the deaf... the blind...

your neighbor... your people... your neighbor...

turn the other cheek... coat and cloak... one mile, two miles... begs, borrows, give...

love your enemies... Sun and rain, evil and good... brothers and sisters...

righteous and unrighteous... perfect... perfect... Perfect.

First I will share with you how these words of God make me feel.

They make me feel like a child again, a 6th grader,

anxious to see my mother, who is a patient on the 7th floor
of the old Charlotte Memorial Hospital,

recovering from rather extreme cancer surgery.

I am upset by her absence; anxious about her future, and about our future as a family;

still too young to fully comprehend what is happening to her,

or why everyone seems to speak about it in a whisper.

I just miss her, want to see her for myself, touch her.

But the visitation rule of the hospital states quite clearly:

NO CHILDREN UNDER 12 ALLOWED!

My father, however, is willing to try to bend the rule, if possible,

to allow me the comfort of seeing my mother, in the flesh.

It isn't enough that my brothers and I travel to the hospital front lawn daily

and squint as we count up 7 floors, and wave wildly and throw kisses
towards the glinting windows there, hoping that our mother is watching us.
This is before cell phones, you know, so there is no guarantee that she is looking out,
just as we are looking up, madly waving and jumping.

So my sweet father escorts me to the Rehab Hospital across the street,
whisks me past the information desk, and politely taps
the shoulder of an African American housekeeping lady,
catching her and her broom mid-sweep
to ask if there might be any way “we” could gain back-door access
to the hospital rooms across the street.

And without batting an eye, she points her broom handle towards an underground
tunnel

connecting the two facilities, directing us through to the end,
and to the gray padded service elevators just beyond,
which we can take to the 7th floor.

She calls it the service elevator,
but I can't help but think that in the not-too-distant past,
it was known as servants' elevator.

Nevertheless, my heart must have skipped 20 beats
as we thank her for her incredible kindness,
and willingness to go beyond her housekeeping duties to help “the other”.

She didn't have to do that.

She didn't have to **turn** from her work to speak to us.

She didn't have to **give** us the time of day, when she is a day-laborer on the clock.

She didn't have to risk her job security to ease that little line of demarcation
between child privileges and adult privileges.

She didn't have to let love govern her response, instead of hospital protocol,
but she did.

And in doing so, she became a reflection, to me, of God's holiness and perfection,

wielding a broom that could just as easily have been a flaming sword
denying access,
but instead became a meter swinging wildly in measure
of God's gracious, boundary-breaking, neighbor-love.

The children of Israel have recently emerged from their Red Sea delivery,
having been baptized into God's Sinai covenant and consecrated as God's holy
people.

And the Lord gives Moses these words from Leviticus to convey
to the entire congregation, as a whole, as a body;
an elaboration of the 10 Words of the Decalogue,
about life to be lived together as us, as we, as ya'll in relationship to one another,
as well as in relationship to "the other", those outside of the immediate
congregation.

Be holy, the Lord says, because I am holy.

Be holy to "the other" because I am the Holy Other.

Leave food and provide for "the other".

Don't steal, lie, cheat, profane or swear falsely to your fellow congregants,
nor do likewise to "the other".

Love your own kin, your own families,

but be prepared to reprove "the other", gently,
as you might one of your own kith or kin.

Do not retaliate or hold grudges within the congregation,

and treat those outside of the congregation as if they were insiders as well,
says the Lord,

because

I am;

because

I am the Lord, your God;

because

I, the Lord your God, am holy;
and because
I am, you are, they are, holy.

Israel's exodus through the Red Sea waters of potential death,
has set her free:
free from slavery, free from bondage, free from oppression,
free from dancing to another's tune.

But free for what?

Rising from the freedom waters, the essential question becomes this:
For what are God's people now free?

Recently, I had a delightful visit with some friends who live out in the country,
far from the madding crowd.

What do you like best about living way out here, I asked them,
thinking, perhaps, the answer might be something quite idyllic, like,
the magnificent sunsets, the stars at night, the quiet, the fresh air,
the lack of traffic, the slower pace of life.

But the answer I received was this:

We like it here because we can do exactly what we want.

We can sleep late on any morning.

We can paint our house any color we like.

We can let our children drive long before they are 16.

We can drive under or over the speed limit, any time we want.

And I marveled at this response and wondered if this is our secular notion of freedom,
the hard-won freedom of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness",
with much regard for me, my, and mine, but with little regard for "the
other".

I doubt if this is the vision of freedom that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had in mind
when he made his famous speech on the Washington Mall

which concludes with the words,

"Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we (not I) are free at last."

I have never forgotten theologian Shirley Guthrie's teaching about freedom when I was under his tutelage at Columbia Seminary.

"If God's freedom is the freedom of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be *with and for* each other," he said, "then true human freedom is *freedom for and not freedom from* other people.

If in the divine community there is no above and below, superior and inferior, but only the free society of equals who are different from each other but live together in mutual openness, respect and self-giving love, so it is in a truly human society of people who are sexually, racially, socially, politically and religiously different from each other." (Shirley Guthrie. *Christian Doctrine*, p. 94)

Or, to put it another way according to an old gospel song,

"None of us are free. None of us are free. None of us are free, if one of us are chained, none of us are free."

(Blind Boys of Alabama. *None of Us Are Free*)

For the children of Israel, and for the children of the heavenly Father, our exodus and our baptism calls us beyond freedom *from* oppression, and calls us beyond freedom for the individual to do exactly what he or she wants, to a freedom *to be with for the other*,

for the hungry, for the poor,

for the blind and the deaf,

for the innocent and the guilty,

for the beggar and the worker;

and yes, even for the enemy and the bully.

And that's a very challenging demand upon our dripping wet lives:

to use our baptismal freedom to enable the dignity and worth of someone else,

someone we might not even know, or identify with, or even like,
because,

I am.

because,

I am, the Lord, your God.

because,

I, the Lord your God, am holy.

because,

I am, you are, they are, holy, too.

Jesus, as he is wont to do, pushes the envelope further,

expecting even more of us in our baptismal becoming than we ever expected.

Jesus calls us to rise from the baptismal waters of vicious recycling of

eye for an eye, quid pro quo, goods for services, tit for tat,

favor for favor, I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine,

and to improve upon our baptismal freedom by *imitatio dei*;

by imitating the gracious generosity of God,

who gives warmth to ALL sun-seekers, and water to ALL bucket-holders;

and to improve upon our baptismal freedom also by imitating the gracious restraint of
God,

who does not cooperate with vindication in any form,

but who breaks that vicious, endless cycle of enemy-making,

by extending love even to those intent upon inflicting harm.

How does one live into that calling, I want to ask?

How can Jesus expect us to be that good, that holy, that perfect?

The Westminster Catechism in our *Book of Confessions* qualifies it as

“improving our baptisms”: the life-long act of endeavoring to live by faith,

drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ (7.277).

How do we improve our baptisms and become something more tomorrow

than we are today, without being self-made, without being
self-righteous, without seeming holier than Thou?

Did you happen to read or see excerpts from the recent memorial service
for Sargent Shriver, who died on January 18th?

Not normally someone on my radar screen, I caught the good words said
at the end of his life, and was moved deeply

by the way this person dedicated himself to improving the lives of others.

Having married into the Kennedy clan,

his social status and wealth certainly enabled him a life of much freedom.

He could have maintained a lifestyle of privilege.

He could have lived far from the madding crowd, slept late every day,

painted his house any color, driven over or above the speed limit any time he
wished.

But he didn't.

Instead, I am inclined to say that he took the servants' elevator!

He lived to be 95, a good, long life,

marked by applying himself to serving "the other".

He took on the leadership of President Kennedy's and President Johnson's

War on Poverty in the 1960's.

He launched projects like Head Start, Volunteers in Service in America, Legal Services,

Foster Grandparents, Upward bound, and of course, the Peace Corps.

In addition, he assisted in championing a cause dear to his wife's heart, the Special
Olympics.

And just three months before his death, visibly weakened by Alzheimer's Disease,

he attended a White Mass for children and adults with disabilities
in Washington, D.C.

And I wondered as I watched news clips from his memorial service,

how was he able to improve his baptism like this;

to use his freedom *for* the benefit of the poor, the disabled,

the mentally ill, the down-trodden, the loveless – friends and enemies alike.
He did it, his son, Mark, noted at his memorial service, “by being deeply rooted in his
love

affair with God”.

Those are words you don't hear very often these days; someone being remembered
and noted primarily by their love of God, first, from which all other blessings flow.

Imagining back to our scripture passages for today,

perhaps this is what God is desiring for Moses to convey in his speech

to the whole congregation of Israel

as they wring the Red Sea water from their clothes.

And perhaps this is what Jesus is commending to his disciples, too,

in their baptismal pilgrimages as they turn their other cheek,

shed their coats and tunics

and tread a mile or two along his way of truth and life.

Root your lives deeply in God: in God's law, in God's word, in God-worship,

and your baptisms will become holier, and more perfect,

not by your own desire or by your own efforts to improve them,

but by your willingness to allow God to use your life to unchain others,

and set them free also.

None of us is free, none of us is free, none of us is free,

if one of us is chained, none of us is free.

Love the Lord your God, with all your heart soul, mind, and strength,

and God will use you to serve neighbors across the social boundaries

and cultural expectations of your neighborhood;

God will use you to loose the chains of “the other”.

And, if, as the psalmist suggests,

we become like the very things that we worship and trust (Psalm 115:8),

then may the corollary also apply to our baptismal becoming:

in the company of God, we shall grow to be like God. Amen.