

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Mission: The Support
July 19, 2020
The Rev. Dr. John Judson

Exodus 6:1-9; Matthew 10:26-33

We had won the city championship and now we were headed to regionals. I was fifteen years old and was on top of the world. Our boys fast-pitch softball team...yes boys fast pitch softball...had won the Houston city sixteen and under championship. The only problem was that there was nothing beyond that for boys our age. It was then that the league asked if we wanted to jump up to the eighteen and under league and go into their regional tournament. Why not, we said, we were a great team and besides, as the team's pitcher, I knew I could handle any batter I faced. The first game of the regionals went as I had predicted. Though it was close we eked out a win. The next day was the regional championship where we were to face the Houston city eighteen and under champions. The first three and a half innings went well. We were tied 4 to 4. Then something happened. It was as if we were suddenly playing t-ball with me setting the ball on a tee for our opponents to hit. Before we could get a single out, the game was called because of the mercy rule...the rule being that if after four innings another team is up by more than twenty runs, the game is over. I have to say that I was never so glad to have a game called in my life. I knew we were beaten and it was time to give up, give in, pack up and go home.

I have been thinking about that game much of this week, and the reality that there are moments when we know that we have lost and it is better to just give up, rather than to keep fighting against the tide of defeat. I have been thinking about this because this is where I believe that Moses and the disciples found themselves at the end of last week's passages. They found themselves in a hole, facing an unbeatable enemy and they should have hoped for the mercy rule. They should have seen that it was time to pack it in, give up and get on with life. Let's begin with Moses. He had come proclaiming that this God of the burning bush was going to set the people of Israel free. All he had to do was have a conversation with Pharaoh and all would be fine. Yet his conversation not only did not free the people, but it made their lives worse. It only increased their workload and drove them deeper into despair. It only made the crushing burden of slavery even more painful. Maybe it was time for the mercy rule to be declared and Moses could go home.

The disciples of Jesus were facing a similar situation. Their mission was two fold. First it was to proclaim in word and deed that the long awaited Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of heaven was becoming a reality in the world in and through the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Second, they were to heal God's own people so that the Jews of Galilee and Judaea would become teammates in this endeavor. As we have discussed over the past several weeks, this Kingdom was not going to look like the Kingdom of Rome and its oppressive rule over the Jews, but a kingdom of justice, mercy and peace. Ultimately this kingdom would be a kingdom that turned the world up-side-down. While God's Kingdom might sound wonderful to his followers, he reminds them that they would be hauled before both secular and religious rulers, beaten, hated and killed. If these predictions were true it might be better not to start the game, rather than wait for the mercy rule to kick in after the disciples suffered and died. Maybe it was time to give up and go back to fishing.

So why weren't these moments the end of the story? Why didn't Moses give in to the power of Pharaoh and see that the game was over and go home? Why didn't the disciples see the handwriting on the wall, and go back home and go fishing. Why didn't they? They didn't give up because they got the support they needed to persevere. Both Moses and the disciples got support from the living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the support that gave them the courage to continue. Listen to God speaking to Moses. "I have heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves. And I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the Israelites, I am the Lord, and I will free you from the bondage of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you

from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the that I swore to give to Abraham, Issac and Jacob.” Listen to Jesus speaking to his disciples. “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the souls...are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs on your head are counted. So do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows.” They did not give up because God was with them.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, Peter, Paul and the disciples is a God who doesn't believe in giving up on bringing in God's Kingdom. There is no mercy rule as far as God is concerned. This God whom we worship doesn't give up on people even when their spirits are broken. Instead God sends men and women like Moses and the disciples to proclaim this kingdom in the face of great odds; odds that would scare an ordinary person. And so we might assume then that when there are men, women and children created in the image of God, who are in need to freedom and justice, that the people who have been called by God's Spirit would stand up for them, refuse to give in and work to make this Kingdom come on earth even as it is in heaven. Unfortunately this has not always been so. In fact the church, the called people of God, the followers of this kingdom bringing Jesus, are often the ones who oppress rather than liberate. It was the church that blessed the theory that white skin was superior to black skin and endorsed the enslavement of Africans and their descendants on this continent, resisting any and all calls for freedom. It has been and continues to be the church that refuses to allow women an equal place at pulpit and table, and argues against equal rights for women, saying men should rule and women should obey. It has been and continues to be the church that works to deny members of the LGBTQ community full inclusion in the church and in society, saying only heterosexual people should have full rights. It was and is the church that fought to insure the church would be the only organization that would be allowed to ignore the Americans with Disabilities act so that they would not have to make their facilities fully accessible to people with disabilities. No, the church, rather than being of support to those who are oppressed for the color of their skin, their gender, whom they love, and how they bodies and minds operate chose to ignore the call to justice and never even got in the game. But this is not who we are.

We are different. I say we are different because we have committed ourselves to being a different kind of church. We have committed ourselves to being Everybody's Church. We have committed ourselves to being a church in which we strive to be a faithful, open and inclusive community. We welcome the full participation of all people of any ability, gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any other life circumstance. And by committing ourselves to that inclusion it means that we are committed to being a church of justice, that sees everyone as a child of God, treats everyone as a child of God and supports all of God's children in their striving to fully access the benefits of this society. This means we are a church of justice not only for people inside these walls but for the world; out where you all are right now. For the church is the called out people of God, not the walled in people of God.

I realize that the task of being the hands, feet and voice of God for freedom and justice in this world can seem overwhelming. We may want to give up and go home to our comfortable lives, seeing our faith as merely a spiritual exercise. But when we feel discouraged, I hope that not only will we realize that God is with us, calling us and supporting us in this endeavor, but that there are others who have come before us who can show us the way. And so this morning I want us to listen to the words of John Lewis, one of the two great leaders of the Civil Rights movement who died this week, the other being C.T.Vivian. I want to offer you three quotes from Mr. Lewis. He said, “We need someone who will stand up and speak out for the people who need help, for people who are being discriminated against. And it doesn't matter whether they are black or white, Latino, Asian or Native American, whether they are straight or gay, Muslim, Christian or Jews” and “Nothing can stop the power of a committed and determined people to make a difference in our society. Why? Because human beings are the most dynamic link to the divine on this planet” and finally “Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year. It is the struggle of a lifetime. Never ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary, trouble.” This is our mission and that is my challenge for you this morning, to ask how can I get in the game to be God's voice and hands and feet to support those for whom God's justice has been denied.