

Painful Decisions Required

Exodus 12: 5-14 Matthew 18: 15-20

Painful decisions are the ones we avoid. They're uncomfortable. They may provoke conflict. They may have lots of unforeseen consequences. They put everyone in an awkward place. They're necessary regardless. They invoke change, for better or worse.

We're all at an age when we should have had the somewhat difficult conversation with loved ones about what should happen if we're suddenly in a position where we can no longer make decisions for ourselves. This means completing a formal Do Not Resuscitate or DNR order, and a Living Will for health care purposes. It happens often enough that a sudden illness or accident befalls someone, and that person's loved one has no proper legal authority to act on that person's behalf. If for some reason you haven't gotten that done, please don't delay.

The same goes for having a last will and testament that explains your wishes for your body and for your personal property. Loved ones who have no idea what you wanted, or can't remember your desires, are forced to make those decisions, not knowing if they've done the right thing or not. And let me tell you that the death of someone can bring a family together, sometimes for good and sometimes not. The opportunity for emotions to run amok, for agendas within the family to surface, for unknowns to appear out of the woodwork, and for well intentioned but misguided counsel being the seeds for conflict are all commonplace. A will that spells things out cures any such problems rather quickly.

Those are a couple of difficult personal decisions that you may avoid or deny.

As a manager or supervisor, you have lots of difficult decisions with some of the stickiest coming with employees; doing discipline, issuing warnings, and even firing them. Yet a failure to act, avoiding a painful decision, can quickly undermine morale, subvert performance, and harm the whole enterprise. It's so much better when everything runs smoothly, and that never seems to last for long.

Leaders are defined by the difficult decisions they make. Harry Truman had two really tough decisions forced upon him. He became President following FDR's death, having been Vice President. Even though VP, Truman knew nothing about the atomic bomb project – the Manhattan project (about which there is a very good show now dramatizing it called "Manhattan") – and soon had to make a decision about using the most destructive weapon ever created at that point.

After winning the presidency himself by a close vote in 1948, Truman deployed the US military on the Korean peninsula to repel an invasion. General Douglas MacArthur, hero of the Second World War, was in charge, but bristled quite openly about being restrained in his battle plan by Washington politicians, meaning Truman. MacArthur repeatedly snubbed the President, who is the Commander-in-Chief, and

Truman took the highly controversial action to fire this war hero and remove him from command. Frankly, Truman had no choice, but it was a painful decision to be forced to make.

When we look at the final stage in the back-and-forth between Moses and Pharaoh, we come to the point of today's passage, the time of the Passover, when death stalked the first born of the children of Egypt upon God's apparent command. The drama has been played out fully at this point, as God through his representative Moses has struggled with the great emperor, Pharaoh. In the contest of wills, each believed themselves sovereign over all, and Pharaoh was regarded as a god himself. The great ruler of the mightiest and richest earthly kingdom refused to comply with the request of Yahweh's agent, a pathetic murderer and fugitive turned shepherd. He may bring spells and magic that disrupted the kingdom and brought havoc, even causing Pharaoh and his leadership to yield in shock and awe, only to recant and retrench when the crisis subsided. Now, the decisive act is coming into play.

The scripture describes how the Hebrews will be saved from the sweep of death that will come upon Egypt, and in this is also the description of the Passover ritual, a holy day that is to be remembered and celebrated for all time by God's people. The proper performance of the Passover ritual provides a certain you-are-there quality, connecting the present generation with the past, meant to be filled with the same tension and urgency as the historic event. You can see it in the descriptions. *You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord.*

While Passover celebrates the Hebrews' salvation and liberation, it is also mindful that it comes at great cost. During the ritual, at the announcement of the ten plagues that came upon the Egyptians, there is a practice of spilling three drops of wine from the cup. It is spilled as a reminder that there shall be no rejoicing over the tragedy that has befallen their oppressors. This is in keeping with Talmudic tradition that when the Egyptians were drowning in the Red Sea, God restrained the angels from singing in praise, saying: "How can you sing while my creatures are drowning in the sea?" (Megillah 10b) It is only a miniscule part of the ritual, but it conveys the awareness of the cost for God to act on behalf of the Hebrews, the difficult decision to cause such tragedy.

Frankly, Pharaoh's unbridled arrogance before God, who gave him warning after warning, and one show of divine power after another, all to no effect, made this tragedy (or something like it) virtually unavoidable. Pharaoh was ultimately unbowed and resisted the authority of Yahweh in order to affirm Pharaoh's own sovereignty as primary. If God does not act decisively on behalf of the Hebrews with whom there is the historic covenant with Abraham, what kind of God would that be, who could act, having proved actions already, but does not act in the end? Can this God walk away from his people because the ethics of the situation are too difficult?

Painful decisions occur throughout scripture. The Sunday School class just finished a series of lessons on 1st and 2nd Corinthians which details the struggles Paul faced in pasturing this fledgling congregation from afar. It's evident that the conflict in the church resulted in the expulsion of someone from the faith community. Paul shares his sadness that this was the only course of action left, but at the same time affirms its necessity in order to keep the congregation moving forward in its ministry. Precisely what the offense was, we don't know – many screwy things happening in Corinth – but it was a cause of great concern for Paul and the Corinthian church leaders.

While there were understandings about how difficult people and predicaments might be handled, derived likely from the synagogue system, it was still a new area. There was no explicit manual, no Book of Order, no code of conduct, nothing – they were making it up as they went along. There weren't even any authoritative *Christian* scriptures, only the Hebrew Bible.

When we turn to Matthew 18, we're reminded again how much Matthew is focused on the community life, on setting standards and authority for faith communities. Matthew's gospel is composed 2-3 generations after Paul's dealings with Corinth. There have been a lot of faith communities established, and surely lots of conflict and issues to be confronted. Matthew is also presenting the teachings of Jesus as they were known either from writing or from tradition, a resource Paul never had.

Today's scripture is one of several selections assembled that confront the question of sin and how the faith community is to handle sinfulness. I can tell you from lots of experience that faith communities stink at handling conflict and dysfunctional people. I remember a church secretary, who was also on Session, who lied in an attack on me that was caught and proven. The Session never thought for a moment to demand her resignation either from her staff position or from Session. Why? She was their friend. That told me everything I needed to know about *my* future with that bunch. Needless to say, the results of that failure were utterly disastrous, but I suppose everyone remained friends.

Surely, such sadly negligent decision-making is all too common, and something like setting personal loyalties over the mission was an occurrence in the earliest church, too. This passage in Matthew provides almost a manual for how to handle one whose sinfulness cannot be tolerated.

While this is recorded as Jesus' teaching, the use of the word "church" or *ekklesia* is anachronistic since the community of Jesus followers wasn't known as "church" or *ekklesia* until long after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Regardless, it is still an excellent witness to what Jesus likely instructed. This counsel works for *any* group of people where conflicts have arisen and a process is needed that ultimately brings correction.

It describes a progressive level of confrontation with the offender. First, try to work it out between the two of you. If not, then take witnesses to be with you. If there is

no repentance, then the whole church needs to be informed. If there is **still** no repentance, it says “treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

We expect that the person is expelled from the community. The apostle Paul expected such corrective action. This excommunication is like a death sentence, being cast out from among those to be saved, and thrown into the sinful world and its coming harsh judgment.

Expecting the imminent return of Jesus, the community of his faithful could hardly tolerate the sinfulness of one of its members. It would be as if the whole community **condoned** such sinfulness if they had failed to act correctively. Instead, this wayward one needs to be treated as one who needs conversion all over again, who needs to repent of their sinfulness and make a public declaration of faith in the Lord.

It’s actually for their own good. They should not be misled into thinking that all is well, as if the opinion and decision of the church does *not* have consequences. By casting them out, there is always the possibility that they’ll reconsider, come into the light, see their sinfulness for what it is, be properly repentant, and **then** return to the community of new life.

The importance of the discipline within the church is reinforced by the binding and loosing passage. It reflects the belief that the church is directly acting in the manner of its heavenly form. There is a direct connection between the kingdom of heaven and the church in the world. Life and death authority is given to the church. It’s great authority and responsibility, and brings with it weighty and difficult decisions.

We have no reason to remember the easy decisions, and often **never** forget the hard ones, the painful ones, the costly ones. Our faith can be a tremendous help, keeping us focused on what God would seek and expect, drawing us into prayer for the sake of understanding and discernment, and to scripture that provides some measures and practices to pursue, and setting us within a faith community whose collective counsel and spiritual giftedness is a resource we don’t utilize frequently enough.

When the decision and its impact belong to the community, the whole community gets affected, and action is required, particularly when it is unpleasant to do so. When these are personal matters, like within a family or among friends or in a work environment, the painful decision is typically unavoidable. Of course, the closer the relationship is, the harder it is to see clearly and act helpfully, and the more necessary having spiritual resources beyond what we possess ourselves.

May we not shy away from painful decisions, always seeking to bring healing and renewal. It is such faith activity that grows us as well as the other, and makes us faithful witnesses and reflections of the grace, love, and blessing of our God and our Savior.