

“T+Q or OM+L”

New London UMC

Sun., Sept. 27, 2020

Exodus 17:1-7 *The Message*; Philippians 2:1-13 *NRSV*

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We’re going to take a moment for an educational aside. Looking at the title of today’s sermon you see letters that probably are the first letter of words. We might think that makes them ‘acronyms’ – but that would be incorrect. By definition an ‘acronym’ is an abbreviation that creates a new word by taking the first letters of other words. For example NASA, or UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief). The sermon title represents ‘initialism’ – where the first letters of words stand alone and do not create a new word. For example the FBI – we always say just the letters F – B – I and they do not create a new word. So the sermon title is not an acronym, it is initialism. Now you know.

In today’s scripture readings we see how people of faith are pulled toward two distinctly different ways of living. One approach involves testing God and quarreling with one another. The other approach involves having one mind and love so we can be in accord with one another as we strive to be more Christ-like. . . . Of course I could just stop here if I believed that we are of one mind. Because what’s the point of preaching the rest of the sermon if you already KNOW where it’s going from here? But I’m not so sure that we’re of one mind these days. I think we’ve all been exposed to too much quarreling, complaining, and conflict – and that over-exposure has left us all feeling a little testy, and perhaps a wee bit hard-hearted.

Moses went through something similar to this on the exodus journey. Did it seem like all he ever heard were complaints? At first he was able to deflect the negative comments. You might remember in last week’s scripture reading we heard that when the whole company of Israel complained about the food, or lack of food like they’d had in Egypt, Moses was able to reply: “I know you’re not complaining to me, you’re complaining to God!” . . . But now that more time had passed; more miles had been traveled; and the whole company of Israel had come to a new campsite that lacked fresh water; they took Moses to task for not providing water for them to drink – and the complaining got to him. Moses took it personally instead of redirecting the complaints to God. Perhaps Moses had truly lost it when he cried out to God in prayer and did NOT ask for water for the people! Instead Moses asked God what to do with these people who were about to kill him! It seems that all the complaining had pushed Moses to act as if he too had forgotten that God was with them, that God heard them, and that God would provide. Because it had never been up to Moses to provide water for the people. That was entirely up to God.

And God made a way for the people to have water. It involved the staff that God had first given to Moses to use back in Egypt. It involved a rock at Horeb, God’s holy mountain. It involved the elders of Israel to bear witness to God’s wonderworking and God’s presence

when Moses used the staff to strike the rock so that water would gush forth. It involved the whole company of Israel to drink that water. And it was for the benefit of Moses, the elders, and everyone in the whole company of Israel that the place was re-named Massah (Testing-Place) and Meribah (Quarreling) so they would ALL remember what came of their testing of God and quarreling with one another as they questioned whether God was there with them, or not. It was here, in this place, that God provided water for them from a rock. To be clear: God had never left them; but their rising level of anxiety had temporarily overwhelmed their trust, their faith in the steadfast love and generous provision God had continuously shown them every day of their journey.

Now it might be tempting to re-name where we are today as ‘Massah and Meribah’ considering how many months we have felt overwhelmed with anxiety, and how often we have all wondered if God is here with us, or not, on this journey we have been on in 2020. But to suggest such a name change would probably only cause an argument that we don’t need. So instead of trying to re-name where we are right now, we might be better served by exploring how we could be of one mind and love with one another and Christ as we continue on in our journey.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians he encouraged his fellow believers to remember how Jesus showed the nature of God through his life by primarily focusing his attention on others and not himself. How Jesus loved people, and reached out to help people, with the same love and generosity that God seeks to provide to all people. And that Jesus didn’t turn away from pouring himself out to help others – even though it led to his death. Paul was pretty clear that the name of Jesus wouldn’t still have the power to stir people today to praise and action if Jesus hadn’t stayed true to living his life the way he did.

So if God could be alive and at work through Jesus, God can also be alive and at work through us – ALL of us. Much like God was alive and at work through Moses to bring resources to God’s people, and there were days when Moses did that well – we will also have days when we do that well. And just as there were days when Moses forgot that it wasn’t all up to him, there will be days when we forget that it’s not all about **us** – but it is *always* about what **God** is doing *through us*. As Christ’s church, as Christ’s Body in the world today, we have become the Way of Christ. We are the Way through which God has chosen to bring resources to God’s people. We are the Way through which God chooses to pour God’s love out to help people. We are that Way of Christ if we have one mind, one love, focused on others, and not on ourselves.

If we can take a pass on spending our lives in Massah and Meribah we will be able to find encouragement in Christ, consolation from love, and by the Holy Spirit we can share in the same compassion and sympathy that filled the mind and heart of Christ. When we

don't put our own wants, our own opinions, our own selves first we will have space to see and hear others more clearly, and God will provide us with the energy to engage with others, and respond well to them.

Yes, it might eventually kill us to have the same mind and love as Christ – but what a way that would be for us to go! I think that it would be far more preferable to do that than to spend the rest of our lives in testing and quarreling with God and one another. All that conflict would make for a very painful way to live until we die. Wouldn't you agree?

Amen.