

Sermon
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Amy Foster
June 3, 2018

Deuteronomy 5:12-15
Psalm 81:1-10
2 Corinthians 4:5-12
Mark 2:23-3:6

From our first reading: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day."

In both our first reading and our gospel reading today, we hear about the sabbath. The Deuteronomy passage is the actual commandment to observe the sabbath, and in the gospel we hear Jesus' interpretation of the purpose of the sabbath—to serve humankind. In the commandment as we hear it today from Deuteronomy, we see that not only are the people of Israel commanded to rest on the sabbath, but they must also allow **all** in their community to rest. This includes slaves and immigrants and even work animals—everyone gets a break! But what I want to focus on today is what follows these instructions. After the instruction to allow the slave and the alien a day of rest, the Israelites are told that they should remember what it was like to be a slave and to be homeless, and just as God supported them, they should likewise support others. "Remember," the commandment says. "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt." Think back to your own experience and put yourself in the shoes of the alien, the slave, the donkey. Remember how relieved you felt when God protected you and provided for your needs, and do the same for others.

This command to "remember" is encouraging the development of what we usually refer to as "empathy." Empathy is the skill of viewing and experiencing a situation from someone else's perspective, putting ourselves in their place and trying to understand the world through their eyes. If you are connected in any way to the world of education, you know that in recent years there has been a lot of discussion about developing "21st century skills" in our students. Some of these skills are the traditional ones: reading, writing, arithmetic. Others, though, are a bit different and include skills such as collaboration, creativity, and—you guessed it—empathy. Educators hope that by developing empathy, students will have a larger and more inclusive view of the world and will be able to collaborate better and work toward a more just world. Whether they become business people trying to develop new products for clients or politicians seeking to serve their constituents, empathy will allow them to be more effective. This "soft skill" is not easily taught and certainly is not easy to measure, but teachers seek to promote it in various ways, sometimes through role-playing activities, and most frequently through stories. No matter the approach, empathy requires the use of our imagination as we work to put ourselves in someone else's place, and if we can connect other peoples' experiences with something familiar to us, then we have a better chance of being successful in this effort.

And that is where the act of “remembering” is so important. God asks the Israelites to remember their own experience so that they can better empathize with everyone in their community and treat them with compassion. There are numerous points in the Torah in which God commands them to remember their experience of slavery and homelessness, of hunger and thirst, to motivate them to be kind and compassionate and generous to others.

This act of remembering is just as important for us today as it was for the Israelites in the time of Moses. No, we haven’t been slaves in Egypt, and we haven’t wandered for forty years in the barren desert, but we have each had times in our lives when we were scared, or felt alone, when we were grieving or felt hopeless. If we can remember those feelings, we will be much more able to connect with those who are suffering, and, more importantly, we will be more inclined to reach out to them with whatever kind of help or support they need. Even understanding people’s joy and happiness will allow us to connect with them, even if they seem very different from us. Empathy promotes compassion and generosity, and it breaks down the barriers between us.

But the biggest challenge in trying to be empathetic comes when we don’t really have an experience to “remember” that is anything like what someone is going through. For instance, I’ve been very fortunate in my life never once to have had to worry about where my next meal was coming from or whether there would be clean water for me to drink. So it’s nearly impossible for me to truly understand what it means to live in extreme poverty. Likewise, I’m a white person in a country that privileges being white, and I’ve never had the experience of someone following me around a store to make sure I’m not shoplifting or having people clutch their purses or cross the street because they were afraid of me simply because of the color of my skin. And, frankly, if I tried to argue that **anything** in my own experience was similar, I think I’d be fooling myself and deeply disrespecting those who do have those experiences on a regular basis. So, if there’s nothing in our own experience to “remember,” what can we do to develop empathy toward others? I think this is where listening and imagination come in. We need to listen to the stories of others—really listen—and try to imagine what they must be experiencing. Those stories can be told to us by our coworkers, by our neighbors, by those sitting in the pew across the aisle. Those stories can come to us in person or through fiction and movies and op-eds and autobiographies and, yes, even the Bible! And when we hear those stories, we need to be willing to do the hard work of using our imaginations and being open to understanding the world in a different way. Whether it’s trying to understand the experience of the folks in Nicaragua who are now facing not only poverty but also political unrest, or the frustration of the people in Puerto Rico who are still living without power, or the challenges faced by our own neighbors dealing with damage from the recent tornado, we need to listen to their stories and try to imagine how we would feel if we were in their place.

As Christians, we tend to hear more about “compassion” than “empathy.” But, if we think about it, the work of developing empathy is fundamental to our beliefs, because it is **exactly** what God has modeled for us. In the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments, we learn that God demonstrated empathy when commanding us to observe the sabbath. In Exodus, the

justification for the sabbath is that God created the universe in six days and rested on the seventh. So, I guess God figured that if God needed a rest after six days of hard work, then we probably did, too! The Christian story itself is, at root, a story of empathy. When God wanted to truly connect with humanity, to understand our perspective, God became one of us. God put himself into our shoes to understand what it means to breathe and walk and sleep and love and weep and suffer. God taking on our human form in the person of Jesus is the most radical expression of empathy I can think of. And so, we can remember God's example, God's own story, as we seek to connect with and love each other. As we work to listen to each other and use our imaginations to bridge our differences, to act with empathy, compassion and generosity. Remember that God brought us out of slavery in the land of Egypt. Remember that God became one of us. Remember that we are all beloved of God. Remember.