

Kinship and Kingship

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement
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Based on the scholarship of Walter Brueggemann as presented in "The Continuing Subversion of Alternative Possibility: From Sinai to Current Covenanting" at the UUMA Professional Days, 2008

For thousands of years people have looked to the Bible for models of how life is best to be lived. And one of the best models is there right up front in the story of Sinai. This week, as Jews all over the world celebrate Passover, the story of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt will be told again, and right there, plunk in the middle of the biblical telling, are the laws for successful community, what I will call the kinship model for it calls us into relationship with all people as with our families. Although the law material of Deuteronomy was actually later addition, for us, as we read the story of the Exodus today, there it is calling us to a community of justice and peace and neighborliness where folks take care of folks, not just *their* folks, but *all* folks, and especially those folks who have no one to care for them: the widow, the orphan, the stranger.

Here are some of the points of that uncommon social ethic:

- Debts owed by the poor are to be canceled after seven years so that no permanent underclass is created (Deut 15.1-18). Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you (Deut 15.15).
- No interest is to be charged on loans to members of the community (Deut 23.19-20). Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you.
- Permanent hospitality is to be extended to runaway slaves (Deut 23.15-16). Remember that you were slaves.
- No collateral is to be required on loans made to poor people (Deut 24.10-13). Remember.
- Wages cannot be withheld from the poor (Deut 24.14-15). Remember.
- There must be no injustice toward orphans or resident immigrants (Deut 24.17-18). Remember.

And here is perhaps the most remarkable prescription for a model of community, an economy that makes regular provision for the needy and marginalized.

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and

the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this. (Deut 24.19-22)

The big three of an ancient agrarian economy – grain, olives and wine – meant to be left for the needy and the marginalized, for those who have no access to the commodities because the commodities are controlled by Pharaoh.

But we humans have a pretty short attention span, and the community of kinship born of the Exodus did not last long. We don't even make it four chapters before the cupboard is bare and kvetching starts, and the people want to trade in their freedom for the life they knew in Egypt.

The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Exo 16.3)

OK, so maybe slavery wasn't all that great, but it beats living on manna and spending forty years climbing up and down sand dunes. All this steadfast love, justice and righteousness sounds great, but so is a nice comfy chair, a big screen TV and a steak with baked potato, hold the sour cream. And so that pull in us to resist the Exodus narrative surfaces. What we need here is a little civilization with our steadfast love. To quote Goldie Hawn in the movie *Private Benjamin* when she suddenly finds herself in army boot camp, “I just want to wear sandals. I want to go out to lunch.”

So the people finally get the land flowing with milk and honey and set to building up that bit of civilization and slaying all the strangers who happen to be inhabiting our promised land. And God no longer lives in the burning bush or in the tent, but requires a tabernacle and then a temple. And the temple is made of three parts—the outer court, the sanctuary and the inner sanctuary, the holy of holies. And the community is divided into those who can enter the outer courtyard and those who can enter the sanctuary and those who can enter the holy of holies and the hierarchical division of space imposes its hierarchical division of community and no longer is the widow, the orphan and stranger our concern because we're just trying to get into the sanctuary, or even business class, let alone first class. It is now a world of cultic access (not unlike modern healthcare policy) where economic standing and morality ratings are the keys to entry.

But then along comes a king, a great and mighty king, a king praised for his wisdom and his wealth. King Solomon. And “thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom.” King Solomon who rebuilds the Temple once lost on an even grander scale with an outer court called a vestibule, and a holy court called a nave, and a holy of holies, the inner sanctuary, overlaid completely in gold, where only the priests may enter. And then he overlays the whole thing in gold so it will be perfect just in case anyone missed the point that Solomon has some gold to throw around. And this monument to an imposed social order, this house of God where the people cannot enter to worship their God, is all built with forced labor.

Thus with the height of civilization we have a new triad to replace the outworn *hesed*, *mispat* and *tsedeqah* of Sinai's kinship narrative. Now we have the kingship model: wealth and power and wisdom. It is clear that Solomon is committed to wealth. And as you read through the accounts it is clear that he is committed to power, which is linked to his great wealth, for Solomon not only receives tributes from all the other kings, but Solomon has built a very healthy trade in arms dealing. His commercial power was matched only by his military might with immense fortresses built all over the country.

But all this commercial and military success depends on knowing what they neighbors are up to so military intelligence (ah, wisdom!) becomes a prized commodity. Solomon is known for nothing if not for his wisdom. But as Walter Brueggemann points out the reputation has no claim to personal boast but only in terms of hiring the right folks. Part of it was being a patron of the arts and hiring all those poets who composed the hundreds of proverbs and songs attributed to Solomon. The second part of Solomon's wisdom was that still tried and true strategy of surrounding himself with the best and brightest in government. And the third was military intelligence. It all combined for an unparalleled combination of wealth, power and wisdom and so we still sing his praises. Who needs steadfast love when you have enough gold to support three hundred wives and seven hundred concubines? If the love isn't steadfast enough just buy another set. Who needs justice when you have more power than anyone else? Who needs righteousness when you can buy your way to wisdom?

Oh, but then there are those prophets. Those loudmouth poets who keep showing up saying God sent them and ruining all the fun. Those folks from out in the hinterlands where they can see what's going on in Jerusalem and have just enough time on their hands, on account of not being invited to all the parties, to read the history and scriptures and make the connection that you, o mighty king, are beginning to look an awful lot like Pharaoh with your forced labor gangs building grand public works projects and your conspicuous consumption and your control of all the commodities and imposed social order that keeps those commodities out of the hands of the widows and the orphans and the strangers.

And suddenly there is Jeremiah, from out of the nowhere backwoods of Anathoth, saying:

Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jer 9:23-24)

Well, what are you gonna do now?

Here some thousands of years beyond the actual events we've read the book and seen the movie and we know how this is going to come out. The great kingdom is going to split in

two. Its people will be conquered and scattered across the earth. Its greatest monument to the God who was ignored, in all its gilded glory, will be reduced to rubble.

But that's not really how the story ends, because the story hasn't ended yet. We have the same choices to make today and we still have the same options. We can heed the Sinai narrative of kinship and make steadfast love, justice and righteousness our guiding values or we can continue with the trajectory so ingrained in our national culture of wealth, power and wisdom for hire.

And then again, it's not completely an either/or proposition. As the reading from the Gospel of Matthew acknowledged we do need the things of wisdom, wealth and power to a degree. As Martin Luther King observed "one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites—polar opposites—so that love is identified as a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

I would go further to connect together all the elements of our two triads; that wealth without righteousness is simply predatory while righteousness without wealth is impotent; that wisdom and justice cannot stand apart because neither can truly exist without the other. So we need both triads, but we also need to establish which model is the defining model for us, which set of values are the defining values to which the others remain linked but subordinate. Will we choose a model of kinship to be the dominant one or will we choose the model of kingship?

For all Solomon's wealth, his story stands as warning against an economy based on fear, scarcity, consumerism and control. For all his power, his story stands as warning against the National Security State. For all his wisdom he could not avert both social and political failure. But we have the advantage of history on Solomon, and we can see what the choices have led to in the past. We have seen the empires rise and one and by one conquer each other and one by one fall. Our history books record the fall of Jerusalem, the fall of Babylon, the fall of Rome, and down through history.

And still we have a powerful capability to close our eyes to the lessons of history. In our day the very name of the prophet, Jeremiah, who tried to call Israel back to her covenant of *hesed*, *mispata* and *tsedekah*, has been reduced to mean someone who is pessimistic about the present and foresees a calamitous future. Well, I'd say Jeremiah had reason to be a bit tetchy about the course of his society, and rather than sit and await some end imposed by a conquering power Jeremiah tried to call his people back to the covenant of kinship before it was too late. We have that same power, at least that much.

And we have another advantage on Solomon. We have within our national heritage the ideals of rule by the majority, of the public good outweighing the good of the few. It is there, and we can call it into action. We have a tradition of individual action and free

speech and we can call them into action. We can call ourselves back to kinship, to steadfast love, to justice and righteousness. We can consume less and nurture our planet more. We can fight less and nurture our children more. We can stand up against powers who would lead us into destruction, for “power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. “

In this season and in all days, let us remember that we were once slaves in the land of Egypt, and were redeemed not by a king, but by the invincibility of the Eternal Truth of love, justice and righteousness.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto, puede ser.

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