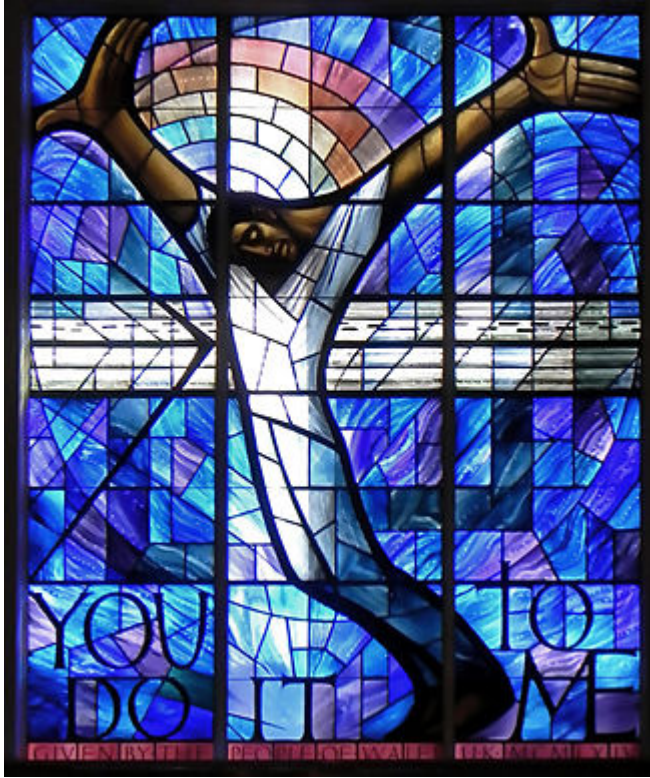


# ““We are All the Same in God’s Eyes” by Paul Holmes



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“We are all the same in God’s eyes.” “We are all the same in God’s eyes.” We say it, but do we truly believe it? Do we really live it? And to what extent does scripture validate it?

It’s human nature to constantly compare ourselves to one another. Some are smarter. Some are stronger. Some have better jobs. Some are more centered or compassionate. Some drive newer cars or live in bigger houses. Some are more articulate, have better hair or better lawns. Etc. Etc. Swimmers compete to see who is fastest. Football teams strive to be “the best.”

While I love sports, I have to admit that the concepts of competition, hierarchy, caste, superiority and winner-take-all are dominant in our country and around the world, and those

concepts can be damaging. They pervade virtually every aspect of our lives and culture. If they do better, it must mean that we are doing worse. It seems like competition reigns supreme. Meanwhile, we and our entire culture struggle to collaborate, cooperate, compromise and work together.

When I first read today's lectionary in preparation for this sermon, I was struck by the question "How much does scripture underpin and perpetuate this competitive, hierarchal thinking?"

Many people and many countries share what's called a national narrative. A national narrative is created from myths, legends and historical events to promote stories of shared identity, shared achievements, common values and characteristics. These stories help bridge cultural divides, knit a nation together and emphasize why a nation is exceptional.

Today's readings touch on one such national narrative. Before moving on to the ten commandments, our Exodus scripture begins "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..." Then in John, we have the story of Jesus overturning the tables and kicking out the money changers. But that story begins with the line "Because the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem." We are reminded that the celebration of Passover takes us back to God unleashing the most violent and last of the plagues that ultimately convinced the Pharaoh to let Israel, God's people, go.

Exodus is certainly one of the most central and most powerful stories in all the Bible. It is so familiar – the tribes of Israel go into Egypt, survive famine, are forced into hundreds of years of slavery and suffering, are freed, and ultimately led to a place of safety in the promised land; most of this in

a binding covenant with God as God's chosen people. Israel overcomes adversity and hardship, but it is God who is the key actor in Exodus, and it is God who chooses to protect and bless Israel.

The Exodus story is echoed repeatedly throughout the Bible, in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Gospels, and I learned this week, even into the Book of Revelations. Exodus is a redemption story, a liberation story, emphasizing a powerful and unique relationship with God. It is so powerful that enslavers in America kept its liberation power from the people they enslaved. Exodus is foundational for the Jewish people, and for thousands of years, it has helped shape the consciousness and values for Jews and Christians alike. It is only natural that people want to self-identify with the blessed people of Israel.

On the other hand, Exodus and subsequent books like Joshua also endorse beliefs and violent events and practices that have been appropriated and misused by multiple countries, powers and empires throughout history. Seldom has scripture been as twisted and abused as much as has the Exodus story, especially when it is used to provide the moral underpinnings and justification for malevolent policies and practices: "othering;" us vs. them; superior vs. inferior; or employing violence to restore supremacy.

This mistaken theology seems straight forward; if we do what God wants, God will reward us. If we don't, God will punish us. So, it logically follows, if we're doing well and we are on top, it must be because God put us there. We must be God's chosen. Conversely, those who are poor and struggling must not be favored by God, so it's their fault.

For thousands of years empires, nations and powers have wielded this claim of being God's chosen. They have elevated that claim and weaponized it to transform institutions, systems, policies and perspectives into instruments that

advantage one group of people while degrading, disparaging, disadvantaging and dehumanizing others. Similarly, the claim of being God's chosen has provided justification for the plundering of resources on land and in the sea, and for the befouling of water and air.

That claim of God-given superiority has been weaponized the world over, and today is playing out in various forms in lands as distant as Russia, India, Iran, Afghanistan, Israel and the U.S.

Some of us are taking a School of Christian Growth class on the terrible and merciless application of what is called the "Doctrine of Discovery." Acting in the name of God, white Christian churches and European empires//, whole peoples, tribes and ethnicities have been dispossessed of their land, forced to assimilate and/or be exterminated.

In so many ways today, the Doctrine of Discovery continues to fuel claims of divine support for racial, ethnic and cultural discrimination, superiority and violence. Our liturgy for lent compels us to examine in particular the myth of white supremacy, the collusion of the church and their harmful imprints on our systems of education, health care, justice and incarceration, land distribution, wealth generation, political power and truth.

Looking at our own country, we have woven long and strong threads linking the United States to the chosen people in Exodus. The United States national narrative, our national myth, goes something like this:

With God's blessing and help, we were freed from tyranny. Though we come from many different places, we are one united people. All of us are created equal and live in a land of equal opportunity where all can live the "American Dream." (And our national myth continues...) We are imperfect yes, but we have worked through our problems. Notably, we are an

exceptional people, ordained and destined by God to expand our dominion across unsettled, virgin, promised lands, and beyond.

That narrative is a myth. Yet we strengthen and encourage it with anthems, hymns, holidays and rituals, all the while denying that many of the benefits some of us enjoy are thanks to the labor, pain and dispossession of others who we have oppressed and subjugated.

America's sense of being "chosen" has led to white Christian supremacy, and many interpret our so-called "success" as a country as a manifestation of God's work. Even during the Revolutionary war era, there was strong support for making us officially a Christian country, but today we are teetering on the edge of slipping into a theocracy. Some of you have seen the recently released video that states "God looked down on his planned paradise and said: 'I need a caretaker.' So, God gave us Trump."

Humorous on the surface perhaps, but it is believed by millions and is endorsed by Christian nationalists who perversely and abhorrently invoke God's favor for their own shameful objectives. How does such reprehensible blasphemy gain traction?

Most of us Seekers question parts of the Bible, developing our own relationships to God, Jesus and the Bible and taking responsibility for our own beliefs and actions. We trust that our beliefs and faith mature and grow as we age. To the religious heritage of our youth, we add our individual encounters and relationships with different people and our individual life experiences. As I have aged, my understandings of life, the Bible and faith have grown more complex, much broader and more inclusive. I now strongly embrace the seeds of the divine within each of us, and specifically acknowledge and appreciate the divinity within people from non-Christian cultures with whom I have worked.

For me, most of the Bible is a valuable source of history, reflection, contemplation and spiritual wisdom, but I do not see it as an essential source of spiritual authority. Though we Seekers consistently use this phrase, and are strongly encouraged to do so, I do not experience the Bible as necessarily the "Word of God" but rather as words, many of which were inspired by God. The Bible is not a "one-and-done" holy book. God never stops reaching out and inspiring

Looking down on creation, I believe that God laments, God grieves, and God has a particularly soft heart for the oppressed and suffering, but I am repelled by the suggestion that God chooses one people over another; that God gives one people dominance over another.

I can hear it now: "Not so fast Paul. It's more complicated than that. Dominion for instance can be a good thing. It can promote order, conformity, growth, surplus, peace, stability." I acknowledge life's complexity, but my bottom line is God does not choose one people over another. God does not have favorites. God does not compare one of us against another.

Our theme for lent is "Liberating Christianity." For me, one part of "Liberating Christianity" is freeing ourselves and our faith from doctrines, beliefs and texts that are being weaponized and that may tempt us to act contrary to the teachings of Jesus, especially his commandments to love our God and to love others as ourselves.

As Christians, we have a responsibility to take care and not be too casual about how we interpret and use the Bible.

Biblical passages promoting the concept that God has favorites are examples that do not represent "the word of God." We are called to transform those texts for good, updating them to embrace the New Testament message that God's love extends to all people and to all creation.

Whether we recognize it and appreciate it or not, each of us is chosen by God. We are all the Creator's chosen people.

We are not chosen – to oppress, dispossess, dehumanize, destroy

We are not chosen – to control, harm, or have dominion over people and resources

We are not chosen – to stoke fear or seek order through violence

We are chosen – to enjoy, celebrate and give thanks

We are chosen – to promote inclusion and community

We are chosen – to be caretakers and stewards of creation

We are chosen – to examine our history and our present and to confess our wrongs

We are chosen – to work towards redemption, conciliation, restitution and repair

We are chosen – to serve, care for and show compassion and empathy

We are chosen – to pray, preserve and protect, to heal and liberate

This morning, we were reminded of all ten of the commandments. In a few moments, as we share the bread and cup, let us remember and focus on Jesus's top two commandments: first, we are chosen to appreciate, really appreciate and take care of all of creation and all the gifts we have been given and, second, we are chosen... to love all people.

May it be so.