

# *“Remember, Restore, Renew”*

**Exodus 12:1-14/Romans 13:8-14/Matthew 18:15-20**  
**Part VII of VII in the sermon series:**  
**“For Such a Time as This:**  
**Seven Lessons for Living Through Pandemic Times”**  
**Based on Esther 4:14**

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From the Pulpit

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## “Remember, Restore, Renew”

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*Prayer for Illumination:* May the words of my mouth  
and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable  
in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation Amen.

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We come to the end of our Sermon series: *For Such A Time As This: Seven Lessons for Living in Pandemic Times*. We began this series thinking about the strength and fortitude of one Queen Esther, for whom the book of the Bible is named. Remember young Queen Esther saved the entire Jewish community in Persia from extinction. She is one of the great biblical heroines that demonstrates how to respond in the face of great crisis. Her uncle Mordacaï speaks to the new queen Esther and beseeches her to use her position to save their people and not “keep silence at such a time as this.” So these words ring true, “Maybe you were made to be queen for such a time as this.” (Esther 4: 13-14).

In other words, this is the moment God has given you to step up and step out and lead. Will you embrace this moment? Will you be the leader God has called you to be? Or, will you shrink from your

responsibility and hide in your silence? These are powerful questions that hit each one of us and can indict anyone of us in the hour in which we are needed. God knows the answer.

What might it mean for the people of Queen's Esther's time to live in a new way. To be led to a new imagination of faithful living different from what they knew before. What would it be like to Remember the past; Restore an identity; and Renew a sense of community?

Maybe you've had a chance to ponder some of these questions posed earlier in this series. Maybe you've been in a place where you can step up and speak out. When we have the opportunity to lead---will we? When faced with an opportunity to speak the truth---do we?

A lot has happened in our world and in our lives since we began this series. Two political conventions raise the collective national temperatures and blood pressures and set the Presidential political season into hyperdrive. It is the kick off of more political ads and campaigning until November 3rd as we choose what kind of leader will lead our nation for the next four years.

There are daily protests for racial equity in the United States. There are racial tensions heightened on our streets and more people are awakened to the cries for inequality and need for major reform.

Also this summer, more unarmed black men have been shot at the hands of police on the streets of American cities too many times this summer. New video emerged just this last week of another black man, Daniel Prude who died at the hands of police in Rochester, NY months ago. This event happened after Prude's brother called for help for a mental health crisis.

Economic disasters and business hardships. Millions unemployed. Essential workers finally seen and celebrated for the work environments that now, because of Covid-19, put them at more risk. The fight for the soul of America continues. Chaos seems to be all around us.

And surely as you turned your calendar, September is here. And after much debate and delay and even some protest, school administrators and teachers and families have made difficult and calculated decisions about education this year. Teachers balance new protocols and new students in remote learning, all the while assisting their own children in a new format. Parents juggle work from home and remote learning; multiple computers, multiple learning plans for each day.

I kid you not, in our household---our Wi-Fi router quivers in fear, each and every day when 9am comes around, wondering if it will be enough for the needs of this day. It must repeat the familiar refrain from “The Little Wi-Fi that Could.”

Regardless, there are many of you who are in the midst of decision overload. We want to do the very best we can in the situation that we have in front of us and nothing seems familiar. The very routine that we used to hold doesn't work. Our muscle memory doesn't hold up. The return to school, return to the program year at church---is all different. It's exhausting. Nothing seems familiar. Everything seems new.

When the response to Pandemic times is to move into isolation and separation, what is the impact on the individual? What is the impact on a community, a community of faith during these times? What does community mean when we are so separated from one another. What kind of community will emerge out of these pandemic times?

Let's remember the strong of God's people in the book of Exodus.

If the Hebrew people learned anything during their time of slavery in Egypt up to this point, it is that no matter how difficult their circumstances, no matter how loud their cries to God, God hears them. God responds. God sends Moses to deliver them. This community remembers God's promises and God remembers them. God restores their community. God provides a new way forward for them.

God keeps the Israelites safe. God shows up and protects them. Like the Israelites, in your most challenging times, God sees you, God supports you and God Loves you.

The same can be said for communities in conflict. I think Matthew is way less interested in rules for rules sake than he is in rules for the community's sake. In particular, rules that protect the vulnerable (noting that his community feels pretty vulnerable right now).

Jesus' instructions about resolving disputes or, more acutely, the impact of our poor behavior, may reflect that, Matthew's community was struggling with disputes and the impact and consequences of poor behavior. Usually we read these verses as a universal approach to conflict resolution, and not about Matthew's concern for the struggles of his folks. But, as we know from experience, conflict can hurt. When members of a community show little regard for others, everyone suffers.<sup>1</sup>

The entirety of chapter 18 focuses on those who are vulnerable in our community and our care for them. Just prior to our passage, comes Matthew's version of the lost sheep – pointing out God's concern not to lose any of the community, even those who have

gone astray (10-14). When fractures happen in a community, don't give up. Try everything you can to hold a community together.

In reality, very few of us readily move toward conflict in our lives, in our homes, in our family of origin, in our work life and particularly in the church. Many of us just run away, avoid and blame. But Matthew is offering us this lovely opportunity to keep engaged in conversation with the one we may disagree with (as challenging as that may be).

As we heal our divisions in our family and communities and come together, God is powerfully at work and nothing is impossible. Moreover, Jesus promises that when we are about this reconciling work – that is, when we come together as a community to address our differences, resolve our disputes, seek to end conflict, and repair relationships – God is there. Jesus reminds us, “even when two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Always. Supporting, encouraging, blessing our efforts. We are not alone and that's why we don't give up.

With the chaos and anxious unrest in lives, this passage seems relevant to us this morning. It's the helpful reminder to hear that God sees you, God supports you and God loves you.

All of this strikes me as remarkably timely as we deal with a pandemic, economic upheaval, racial injustice and cries for reform, and a polarized political landscape. The heart of this passage is about Christian community – what it is, how it suffers, how to address hurt, what a healed community can do.

What kind of community we are going to be?

Can we look at those around us and believe and affirm that even those who disagree with us on important issues are nevertheless loved by God?

Can we imagine that the goal of our community is to nurture relationships inside and outside our congregation?

Can we commit to going to great lengths – even of tolerating those who disagree with us about who should be our next president! – to engage each other in conversation, hoping that we listen to one another.<sup>2</sup>

We live in hostile, divisive times. To be sure, we are not the first people to live through such conflictual times. This is not anything new. Heightened emotions, extreme polarities, intense levels of convictions, and deep personal attachments to issues we now face are the makings of a perfect story that many feel ill-equipped to navigate.

However, conflict is not new. It is not new in the world at large, and it is not new to the church, individual congregations or church members. If we can count on anything, it is a fact that conflict will arise. Sometimes it comes in overt ways, sometimes in covert ways.

The 7th lesson for Living In Pandemic Times is that the community can remember, restore and renew its commitment to one another and chart a path for a future as a community that works together for good.

One thing has been abundantly clear to me in this time of pandemic. Life looks much different. It has to. It has to look different because our collective future is at stake. What kind of people are we going to be after this?

What this crisis has illuminated is that we cannot return to normal. For some many, that normal wasn't working very well. Overworked couples with little time for connection. Over Programmed children and youth, with little time for deep connection and creative play. Stressed out parents not having any time for each other. This was not a way to honor God and community and each other. The fast paced nature of the world before Covid, always was unsustainable. Now--- we can not go back to that. We must fight that with every breath of our being.

Because of this Pandemic, we have to replace our priorities with others. We have to put people before profit, place cooperation before competition. Above all, we have to access our collective abundance of kindness.

People of God, may we live each day, trusting in an abundant God. A God who acknowledges our pain, listens and hears us when we cry. And may we be surrounded by a community of faith, willing to remind us that we can do hard things. We can stand up together for the truth-telling that needs to be heard in this community. And may you always know that-God sees you. God supports you. And God loves you. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>David Lose, In the Meantime Blog, September 2020.

<sup>2</sup> David Lose. Community Rules, In the Meantime blog post. September 2020

## **Matthew 18:15-20**

### Reproving Another Who Sins

‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. Thanks be to God.