

All Y'All

30 July 2017

Exodus 24:3-8

Matthew 26:26-32

Luke 23: 33-43

I was born and raised just a little way north of the cultural-historical curiosity that is the Mason Dixon line, and I confess I am a northerner through and through.

Try as I might to cultivate a wider historical and cultural reference set, I have to admit that I retain distinctly northern attitudes, northern perspectives, northern habits. And though I would prefer to think otherwise, there is only a limited degree to which friends from other countries have challenged my northerner-ness. Ridiculous and arbitrary as it is, I feel pretty good about being a northerner. If I'm really telling the truth, a little bit superior, even. God help me.

Fortunately I have colleagues, friends, and even family members who are southerners, who are equally confirmed in southern attitudes, southern perspectives, and southern habits that challenge my northerner-ness in ways both good and bad.

As someone who savors language as much as food, I have benefited tremendously over the years from conversing with southern folk. Just as southern cuisine features dishes alien to a northern palate, there are southern conversational norms and expressions for which we have no direct translation in our northern patois. Some of them I have found highly instructive.

“Might could” is one favorite. To the best of my knowledge there is no equivalent substitute in the English language for the double conditional affirmative. No matter that it goes against modern linguistic rules and grates on northern ears, or that it has little utility here in declarative New England. It carries a distinct flavor that I love to employ in the company of those who recognize its flexible meaning.

“All y'all” is even better. “Y'all” is a highly adaptable contraction of *you all* that can variously mean everyone in earshot, a few people out of a larger group, or a single person. It's universally applicable because it can be employed and understood in so many ways. However, where “y'all” is generally inclusive, the intentionally redundant “all y'all” emphatically and categorically precludes any fractional meanings. “All y'all” means everybody.

I believe that *the whole of the law and the prophets* can be summarized with ***all y'all***.

In our Scriptures we see numerous examples of God speaks directly and through the prophets at various times over several thousands of years, addressing groups of people, or specific individuals — ***y'all***. But I believe the central theme of the Bible, Old

Testament and New Testament alike, is that God's grace is for everyone, everywhere, for all time — *all y'all*.

Our Old Testament passage this morning describes the sacrament of God's covenant with the Israelites who have just come out of Egypt. They didn't earn God's covenant, and many of them have already complained bitterly about the conditions in the wilderness. But God extends an everlasting blessing all the same. To ritually confirm God's binding pledge with the people, blood is sprinkled on an altar with twelve pillars representing the twelve tribes. Blood is also sprinkled on the people.

The significance of the twelve tribes and twelve pillars should not be missed. Quoting from Rabbi Dr. Greg Killian, in Jewish tradition, "twelve represents totality, wholeness, and the completion of God's purpose ...[yet] the number twelve never stands alone. It is always associated with a *thirteen*. In Kabbala ... it is explained that the thirteenth transforms the entire set into attributes of mercy. This is because numerically, twelve is a closed, rigid, perfect system; the thirteenth is the center that transforms the twelve into an empathic system."

[adapted from <http://www.betemunah.org/twelve.html>, with some paraphrasing and clarification]

In other words, twelve is everything we know. It is represented by the twelve pillars. Twelve is all there is of creation, and it includes both the natural laws that govern space and time, and the legal laws that govern human society.

Thirteen is represented by the altar. It is mystery, grace, the divine.

So the ritual blood is placed on the altar with twelve pillars to represent God's unbreakable commitment to the twelve tribes, and by extension, humankind and all of creation.

Then the same ritual blood is sprinkled on the assembled people as well, to drive home the point: **this means you**.

Just try to picture this scene. Exodus chapter 12 says that there were six hundred thousand men among the Israelites. That doesn't include women or children, who were almost certainly more numerous. So were all of those people sprinkled with blood? Probably not. Like a Blue Man Group performance, probably only a relative few in the front of the crowd were actually splashed with blood. But that's not the point.

The blood is sprinkled on the altar and on the people as an assembled body, binding all together: those in front and those far back in the crowd, and those who can't even see or make out what is happening. All are included. God's covenant is all-encompassing.

Or, as in the closing words of Roadside Picnic, "HAPPINESS, FREE, FOR EVERYONE, AND LET NO ONE BE FORGOTTEN!"

In our New Testament reading, we revisit the familiar Last Supper story. Here Jesus renews and reemphasizes God's covenant with the people, this time with a metaphoric seal of blood.

He and the disciples have just finished the Passover meal, in which they recounted and celebrated the Exodus and God's covenant. In fact they have just relived the story of the covenant. Passover Seder language is first person: God brought **us** out of Egypt; God released **me** from bondage. God's covenant with **us** is unailing. It's a beautiful, stirring, and somber celebration.

Just after Jesus and the disciples conclude this celebration, he invites them to take the covenant into their own bodies. In so doing they stand in for both the pillars and the people.

Jesus does not say, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood which is to be shed for those of you gathered in this room." Nor does Jesus say, "Drink from it, those of you who qualify; for this is My blood which is to be shed for those righteous few who deserve it."

He says, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is to be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins."

Do you hear the **y'all** and the **all y'all**?

"Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is to be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins."

Y'all drink — individually and collectively, take this in — and in so doing, seal the covenant for **all y'all**."

Each of the twelve drinks, just as each of us has an individual and personal experience with God and each of us takes part in Communion.

All of the twelve drink, just as we partake of God's grace and Communion in solidarity.

And through the twelve — representing totality, wholeness, the completion of God's purpose — the covenant is ritually sealed with and for **everyone** everywhere and of every time who weren't physically there. Just as each time we take Communion we affirm God's covenant with and for all those not present in our company.

Hours later, in our second New Testament selection, Luke reports that even as Jesus is being crucified, he is offering the forgiveness of sins that he had declared and sealed with the disciples.

He forgave the crowds who clamored for death. He forgave the soldiers who abused and mocked him. He forgave the criminal dying next to him.

And He forgave the disciples. Just like the Israelites, the twelve were a ragtag bunch who had repeatedly proven themselves to be exasperating. And ultimately they all betrayed him. Judas turned him in. Peter denied him. All the rest fled. None stood by him. They were regular, fallible people. Just like us.

The twelve tribes failed their part of the covenant, over and over again. The twelve named disciples and all the unnamed disciples failed their pledges of love and devotion. The priests, the crowds, the soldiers, and all of us abuse and fail Jesus. We are all guilty, individually and collectively, of breaking our side of the covenant.

But God's covenant holds.

The thirteenth changes everything. God / Jesus / the Holy Spirit is the thirteenth, the One who created all that is, was, or will be; the one who is within and beyond all things; the one who transmutes and redeems all of our failings by divine grace.

I believe the paradox of the Christian story is this: although God gave us the law so that we would be decent to ourselves and each other, God also provides the deeper law which is God's own grace that stands in for us and all the ways we fail ourselves, each other, and God. There is twelve, and then there is thirteen that holds the twelve together.

Moreover, God's covenant and God's grace are for **y'all** and for **all y'all**. You, me, the people we like, the people we despise, the most righteous and the most depraved. God doesn't exclude anyone.

Laurie shared with us in her sermon last week that we are not to judge anyone unforgivable, because we don't share God's perspective into the soul of another person. Only God can tell the wheat from the chaff. That is true Gospel, God's deeper law, and it is really hard for us to live out.

So instead of focusing my energies on trying not to judge people who spew hate, who abuse the powerless, who seek not only to aggrandize themselves but to do it at others' expense — which let's just acknowledge right here in front of God and everybody is more than I can handle — how about if I just focus on trying to participate for my part in the sacrament of Communion:

reaffirming God's covenant with me, praying for God's moment-by-moment assistance to be faithful in return, accepting God's incomprehensible grace by which my failings are redeemed;

celebrating solidarity in God's covenant with the entirety of creation — everyone, everywhere, those now living, those departed, and those not yet born;

recognizing that for many thousands of years countless others have received the blood and witnessed the covenant with and for me, and that I in turn receive the blood and witness the covenant through and with and for countless others I will never know.

Can I at least try that?

I might could.

With God's help, may we practice together.

And may God bless **all y'all**.

Amen.