

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Strength, and our Redeemer.*

“I would like to acknowledge that this church stands on the traditional lands of the Woronoak and Pocumtuck People and pay my respect to elders both past and present.”

Good Morning. I’m Christine Howe, a lay preacher in the Diocese of NH. Sandi and I met years ago at my home parish, All Saints’, Peterborough. As you all know, Sandi is a brilliant, funny, warm-hearted, and energetic woman. I’m grateful to have her as a mentor and friend and delighted that she asked me to come to Church of the Atonement today.

I have to tell you a story about today’s Old Testament lesson. When I first moved to New Hampshire in the early 1980’s, I attended All Saints’ Church, Wolfeboro, where I lived at the time. The rector there, Randy Dales, was originally from California and the parish where he served as a curate fresh out of seminary was near Beverly Hills. He was about to preach his very first sermon at this church and was understandably nervous. He was sitting up in the chancel waiting for the lay reader to come to the lectern to read the lesson we just heard today—the story from Exodus and the parting of the Red Sea. Randy told me he looked up and “who was

walking up the aisle towards the lectern but Moses himself”—those of you who are old enough will know that what Randy meant was that the reader that day was Charlton Heston, who starred as Moses in the amazing Cecil B. DeMille 1956 epic film, “The Ten Commandments.”

So now every time I read the story of the parting of the Red Sea waters, I think about Charlton Heston and the nervous young curate, who did manage to deliver his sermon successfully and enjoyed a lengthy career as a beloved parish priest and Diocesan Canon in New Hampshire.

There is no doubt that the story of the Israelites’ miraculous escape from Egypt and Pharaoh’s thundering hordes is one of the most dramatic and vivid episodes in the Bible. This is the prototypical cinematic car chase, only with horses and chariots.

The Lord God--who favored Israel--is so powerful that the Psalmist tells us “mountains skipped like rams and little hills like young sheep.” Another astonishing image—one that can’t help but bring a smile to your face as you picture big lumbering mountains and sprightly little hills dancing around, as if in an animated Disney cartoon.

And here comes another image emblazoned in our mind’s eye: On the safe shore of deliverance, Moses’s and Aaron’s sister Miriam picks up her tambourine and dances with all the women, celebrating the Israelites’ victory and safety, and

urging everyone to, “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

This is the story of good guys and bad guys, and it is clear who is who....but...

My friend Marcia and I were talking a while ago and one of us muttered, “I wish things were as simple and clear as they were when we were little.” (That was back in the day of Charlton Heston being Moses, and the depiction of the drowning of armies of humans and their horses cause for Academy Award nominations.)

But Marcia and I, in the next breath, looked at each other and said simultaneously, “I don’t think things were really as simple and clear as we thought...”

Besides being children, we also were protected by our race, our class, our family’s stable financial situations, the educational opportunities available to us, and a general ignorance of the idea of privilege. “Things,” we recognize now, are—and always have been—much more complicated and nuanced than what our ten-year old selves perceived as the only real reality.

And this complexity and nuance is clearly illustrated in the other lessons from today’s readings.

In the Epistle, Paul enjoins the Romans to please just accept each other.

“Quarreling over opinions” doesn’t prove anything or help anything. Individuals have their own beliefs about the practices they must follow—whether it is in

dietary choices, or which day should be designated for worship. Paul talks about acceptance and says, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?” and reminds the community that “each of us is accountable to God.”

And then we come to the Gospel and the parable of the unforgiving servant. Peter has asked Jesus how many times he must forgive someone who has sinned against him. Jesus answers, in today’s New Revised Standard translation “not seven, but seventy-seven.” Or in the KJ translation, “seventy times seven.” Either 77 or 490, that’s a lot of forgiveness that Jesus is suggesting.

And he goes on to tell the story of the king who forgives the debts of a slave who has begged for mercy and how that slave then turns around and refuses to forgive debts that are owed to him.

A coalition of the unforgiving slave’s fellows goes to the king and complains. The king is furious about the mean slave’s selfishness and orders him tortured until he pays his debt.

I suggest we live in a world of complexity and nuance and forgiveness of debts. Not the world of good guys and bad guys, cops and robbers, car crashes and dancing with joy at the slaughter of thousands.

I work in the recovery field. I am a “care coordinator,” working with a team of people who accompany a person in their first year of recovery from SUD. One of

the sayings common in our field is, “The opposite of addiction is not abstinence.

The opposite of addiction is community.”

I was bothered in the Gospel story with Jesus saying that the mean slave’s punishment by the king, a justifiable one we are told, was to be handed over to torture until he could pay his debt. How could he do that?

Perhaps the torture that the man experienced—one which, I fear, we all have experienced—is the torture of resentment. Resentment—like envy, jealousy, and fear, eats a person up. Another saying from the world of recovery is “resentment is like taking poison and expecting the other person to die.”

The mean slave resented having been told to be generous and forgiving. It appears he wanted power and money. But instead, he was grabbed and tortured.

Resentment is torture because it is all-consuming. It blinds one to the goodness around and focuses on the deficits, the comparisons, the feeling that the world owes you something. Resentment leaves you with nothing to give to others because it has consumed you totally.

In a way, coming here today is like a homecoming for me--back to when I was little my family and I lived in Agawam for a couple of years. (I even entered my muffins in the 4-H competition at the Eastern States Exposition and I got a red

ribbon. I was devastated that I didn't get a blue one, and have never entered another baking contest. That is probably another story.)

After living in Agawam, we moved to Leominster, where I grew up and graduated from high school. And Leominster has been in the news this week, hasn't it? High school friends of my sister and me have reported that the situation there is as bad as you can imagine, with ruined houses, washed-out bridges, and bereft people all around. I went on the website of St Mark's, the Episcopal Church in Leominster, and the Rev. Aileen DiBenedetto, the priest in charge there—whom I don't know—urged everyone in a YouTube message to remember that God's love is real and that it is expressed in community. We have each other.

Some of the terrible climate-related problems that are happening more and more often are caused by an infrastructure that hasn't been maintained. Essential bridges, roads, even buildings haven't been kept up.

I would suggest that in order for each of us to be a generous community member, we have to tend to our own infrastructure. A wise spiritual woman told me, "When you give to others, you give out of your overflow..." Our ability to be generous and to serve others comes from our cups running over.

In order to lead God-centered lives—ones where we accept our neighbors as they are even if their habits differ from ours, where we forgive others' debts to us

seventy-seven (or 490) times—we have to attend to our own spiritual needs.

Take care of yourself. Love yourself as you are. Let go of resentments. Remember the words of the long version of the Serenity Prayer:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change...the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace, taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it, trusting that you will make all things right if I surrender to your will, that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with you forever in the next.

Amen.