

Different Gifts, One Body

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

Romans 12:1-8

JGMC 21st August, 2011 – Laura Ebanks

One of my favourite writers, Andy Andrews, in chapter 6 of a book called *The Noticer*, writes about the extraordinary impact of simple and courageous efforts. Except when you go back, you can never really tell which efforts made the biggest difference. So, for instance, should Norman Borlaug, who developed high yield, disease resistant corn and wheat be credited with saving two billion lives from famine? Or should Henry Wallace, the one-term U.S. Vice-President, who created an office in New Mexico to develop hybrid seed for arid climates and hired Borlaug to run it? Or should we credit George Washington Carver, who took a young Henry Wallace for long walks and instilled in him his love of plants? Or should it be Moses and Susan Carver, who adopted the orphaned George as their son? Or should it be... Well, you get the idea. Andrews points out how inter-connected our actions are, creating a ripple effect that can travel across time and space to affect the lives of millions.

Who knows? Maybe one of you in this congregation is a school teacher who will give encouragement to a student who will see something in herself that she hadn't before and in turn befriend another student who was on the verge of giving up on life.... Or maybe one of you young people will stand up to the school bully next week and not only help the kids being bullied but also the bully, who never had anyone care enough to stand up to him before, and in turn he'll go on to be a police officer who protects the vulnerable.... Or maybe one of the older persons in this congregation will be moved to volunteer to read to kids at the library or at our After School Program and one of those kids will discover a passion for language and will grow up to be a great writer....

The things we do each day of our lives – our actions, decision, choices – will, in fact, ripple out with consequences foreseen and unforeseen, for good or for ill, for the health or damage of the world. That question isn't whether, but what...what will we do this week to make a difference in the world. Some of these actions may be big, bold, and courageous. Others may be small, hardly noticeable. And yet they all have the potential to ripple out, affecting countless lives.

In today's reading from the Hebrew Text, it's Shiphrah and Puah, quietly standing up to a bully and tyrant. Who knows whom it will be today, this week, this year.

The Apostle Paul, in our second reading, says that we all are members of the body of Christ, each with different gifts, yet all one in faith and with the same potential for God to use us to change the world. As we take a look at what the Word of God has to say to

us today, let us also consider what that means to us in the week ahead and further into the future.

Please pray with me:

Lord, be with us now as we seek to discern your word for us today so that we may become instruments of change in your world. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today's theme is "Different Gifts, One Body" and I'm pretty sure that our minister and our worship committee came up with that from the passage we read from Romans. However, as I read the two passages over and over, I continually felt led to the Exodus passage instead. So, I had the dilemma of having been given this theme but being drawn to speak about the courage of those women in Exodus who saved Moses' life and ultimately the Hebrew people. And then I thought:

What if....the midwives had carried out the king's command to kill all the Hebrew boys at birth instead of following God's way and using their talents to keep them alive?

What if... Jochabed, the mother of Moses, had said, "There's nothing I can do about this" and not tried to save her infant son by making that special basket to float him in?

What if.... Miriam, the sister of Moses, had thought, "I'm too young to be out there by myself watching over this baby in a basket"?

What if.... The princess had been so afraid of what her father, the king, might do or say to her, that she'd left the baby Moses floating on the River Nile?

What if... each of us continually makes excuses for why we can't make a difference in our community?

What if... we make the decision to not use the gifts God has given us for God's glory? Right here within our congregation there are so many different gifts, yet we often don't put them to good use, choosing instead to make excuses for why we don't act or speak when we should; choosing to use our gifts for earthly recognition, instead of a heavenly reward.

At the beginning of our passage we read that there is a new king in power in Egypt. A king, not unlike modern politicians, who has a short memory and a narrow vision for

the future, because although our text reads “who did not know about Joseph” scholars suggest that the translation should have been “did not care about Joseph.”

This new king is concerned with the fact that the Hebrew population is increasing at an alarming rate. He’s afraid that they could rise up against the Egyptians and escape. It is interesting to note that the king’s fear is not so much that the Hebrews might overthrow his government as that they might escape and he would, therefore, lose his cheap labor force. Today’s Biblical background from the Whole People of God reminds us that very often the church must confront a world, a society, a mindset that is governed by fear, especially fear of “other” people. It reminds us that sexism, racism, homophobia, elitism, etc. keep so many of us in bondage today.

This ruler, wishing to solidify his political base, identifies a common enemy, a scapegoat to blame for whatever current problems plague society. We've seen this in much more recent times. In the thirties, especially in Germany, it was the Jews. More recently it's been, in various countries, by turns, illegal immigrants, welfare moms, gays, the poor who are labeled as “undeserving”, and the Muslims. Right here in Cayman we like to blame the expats and the young people for our problems. One of the chief manifestations of sin is our inclination to define ourselves over and against others and, in the process, denying others their essential humanity, their status as beloved children of God.

The Egyptian king’s behaviour is based on fear and today we continue to fear the encroachment of the so-called “outsider”. When our neighbours don’t look, speak, or think like us, our first instinct is not to welcome them or be curious about our differences. Instead, we tend to choose apprehension and fear. We draw inward, hoping for the protection of the status quo and the familiar. We fail to realize that in our fear of the “other” and the newcomer, we find ourselves at odds with God. God repeatedly sides with the marginalized, the enslaved, the downtrodden, the weak, the poor. What would it take for us to take God’s side rather than dwelling on our fears? The king in today’s story certainly dwells on his fear. He is so fearful of these people who, “were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them,” that he tells two Hebrew midwives that whenever they help the Hebrew women give birth, if the baby is a boy, they should kill it. (I have to say here that after studying this passage I keep thinking that it was the girls he should have feared and not the boys. I guess he figured that by getting rid of the boys their numbers would not increase so rapidly. But he obviously didn’t know about the courage of the Hebrew women and their determination for their people to survive.)

Anyway, at this point in the story we are introduced to Shiphrah and Puah. Talk about defiant women – these two certainly were! They continued to assist with the safe

delivery of boys as well as girls and are commended in this passage for lying to the king and saying that the Hebrew women are just too fast, giving birth before the midwives can arrive.

This is actually a courageous act of civil disobedience that changes history, because one of the boys that is spared will be called Moses and he will lead the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity. He will deliver God's law to the Israelites and bring them to the promised land. And it all starts here, with two women willing to say "no" to an act of injustice.

Now please don't leave here today saying, "Laura is in support of rioting and wild demonstrations against the government." What I'm pointing out is that oftentimes, by simply speaking up for what is right or speaking out against what is wrong, by refusing to do what we know is wrong, even when we're being told otherwise, and yes, sometimes by participating in peaceful demonstrations, we can make a difference in our community, in our country, in our world, just like these two midwives were willing to do.

I doubt very much the two midwives thought they were changing the world. But they were, just by being faithful, by following the dictates of their hearts, and their conscience.

These two courageous women feared God more than any earthly king. Their allegiance to God gave them the courage to make the tough decision of using their gifts for God's glory instead of performing for earthly praise and recognition. Their brave action sets the stage for a series of events that lead to the Exodus. Two ordinary midwives, despite possible punishment for defying the king's orders, make a momentous decision.

Whatever role we play in life, we, too, are called to make decisions. Even when they seem trivial, they can make an everlasting difference in our own lives as well as the lives of others. We are called on to stand up for our Christian faith and for what we believe in.

Last week Mr. Bryan shared about the high numbers of people who clicked on "disagree" when someone thanked God for saving their life in a news article online. It might be that we're called to do something as simple as clicking on "agree" when something like that happens. If enough people agree with seeing God's presence in the great as well as small events in the world, it might cause those who don't agree to stop and think. At Bible School we talked about God Sightings and encouraged the children to look for God all around us. Do we, as adults, remember to look for God and are we willing to share those God Sightings with others? Are we willing to speak up for

God and for justice and speak out against the evil and the injustice we see all around us?

It's our choice and God gives us the wisdom and determination to make those tough decisions. We simply have to stay close to God in prayer, put our trust in God, and obey God's laws, just as those two midwives did.

After being introduced to the midwives, the story now shifts to a couple from the tribe of Levi who become the parents of a baby boy. A baby boy who is in danger of being put to death by Egyptians following their king's orders. The baby's mother decides to hide him and is able to do so for three months. (I keep thinking that he must have been the best baby ever born if no one heard him crying during his first three months!) It's been said that a mother's lap is the best place from which to launch a life. But at three months? That seems a bit early to be letting go. According to Carol Kuykendall, author of "Learning to Let Go," letting go is a heart-attitude that begins at birth. It begins with recognizing that our children are gifts from God and that they still belong to God. They are merely loaned to parents for upbringing and nurturing in the Lord. The process continues with a daily choice to relinquish a child to God's care, God's instruction, God's control.

Letting go means learning early to release our children and applaud each step they take away from us, until, at last, they stand on their own with God.

Apparently, Moses' mother, Jochabed, knew all this long before the book was written. She certainly was willing to let Moses go into God's care at a very early age. Her love for her son, coupled with her faith, enabled her to act courageously in the midst of great oppression. She used her God-given wisdom and talent to construct a waterproof basket which would float and protect her precious baby. Then she places him in that basket and sets him in the reeds along the bank of the very river in which the king has ordered the Hebrew babies to be drowned.

Moses' sister, Miriam, takes up her position at a distance and watches over her brother as he nestles in his basket, hidden among the reeds. I wonder what she could have been thinking as she watched. Did she understand her mother's reason for putting him there? Was she concerned about his safety? About her own safety out there alone? What went through her mind as she saw the princess, of all people, discover him there? How relieved she must have been when she realized that the princess had compassion on the baby. One thing I know is that even though she was young, she showed courage and wisdom. Courage in not only watching over her brother, but also in approaching the Egyptian princess. Wisdom in offering to find a Hebrew nursemaid for the baby and so ensuring that he remained with his own family for a few years, learning about his own people's history and about the one true God.

We were also reminded last week that God uses people to do God's work and this story is certainly a great example of this. God uses whatever and whoever is needed to get God's saving work done, and sometimes it doesn't follow all the rules, and sometimes the characters in the story are people we wouldn't normally consider God-friendly. Think about it - two lowly midwives, a mother with a simple basket, and a sister, all used to save the life of one who would become the deliverer of his people. Too often, we fail to see God at work through the ordinary people we encounter in our daily lives. This story surely belongs to the oppressed and the downtrodden. Against a backdrop of tyranny and injustice, God used a series of defiant and courageous women to act on God's behalf. Have you noticed that the powerful – the king and the princess – go unnamed, while the lowly midwives are named? Many times in the Bible we read stories of women who are simply referred to as just that: a woman. Yet in this passage we actually learn the names of the midwives. And although Moses' mother and sister are not named in this particular passage, their names are given later on in Exodus.

But God also uses people of power. The princess' prestigious position enables her to make a difference in the world. The Jewish people honor those whom they designate as "righteous Gentiles." These are men and women who, although nonbelievers, have assisted God's people in some significant way. Surely, Pharaoh's daughter should top that list. She could have feared this child of another race. She could have feared her father's reaction upon finding out she'd saved this Hebrew baby. Instead, she courageously and compassionately delivered a child from death, a child who would one day act as the great deliverer of the Hebrews.

She had the courage to adopt this baby in spite of the fact that her own father had ordered his death. She did not let fear dominate her, but instead chose compassion. Her compassion contrasts with her father's brutality. This member of the king's household becomes the adoptive mother of Moses, and so the powerful king becomes his adoptive grandfather. How ironic is that?

After spending the first years of his life in a Hebrew household, Moses is taken to the palace to be raised as the princess's son. This, too, was God's way of preparing Moses for a greater purpose. Being raised with the aristocrats no doubt helped to make him into a bold and fearless leader. His royal upbringing meant that he developed leadership traits he would need to lead a large nation through many trials and triumphs. Also, because Moses was not so commonly known among his people, he became even more respected by them. The fact that he did not grow up alongside everyone else, set Moses apart from them, and most likely made him all the more awe inspiring. Moses would have acquired a royal demeanor through his upbringing, a quality which would have served him well as he led his followers from being lowly slaves to God's royal servants.

God worked through the lowly and through the powerful to not only save Moses' life, but to save an entire race of people. In the Romans passage we hear Paul urging the Romans to respond to God's great gift of love in Christ by offering themselves as living sacrifices. This means not conforming to the world's standards. It means being humble, using our gifts for God's service, supporting one another, and sharing generously.

God gave each of those courageous women in Exodus the gifts they needed as individuals and, ultimately, to work together for the common good of God's people. But what if they hadn't been willing to use those gifts?

God is still alive and at work in our world today through us as individuals, and as a people. May each of us have the courage to use our individual gifts, no matter how humble or how powerful they may seem to us and no matter what our position in society, for the common good of our church, our community, our country, and our world.

Individually and collectively, we CAN change the world!