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Exodus 1:8-2:10

Romans 12:1-8

MIDWIFERY

Preachers, odd creatures that we are, find it interesting in how sermons are depicted in stories and movies. Frequently, those depictions are not very flattering. However, there is a sermon that is described in Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, Beloved, that is unconventional by normal sermon standards, and is extraordinary in content. The novel is an account of a former slave's memories in a post-Civil War environment. The preacher, if you will, is a former slave named Baby Suggs who preaches to a gathering or even a 'congregation' of other former slaves gathered in a clearing in the woods. Those who had been freed from slavery had not been freed from hateful words and violent actions. So the preacher challenges her listeners to love their dark flesh, saying, "Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it... O my people, they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them! Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you!" And Preacher Baby Suggs goes on to list their various body parts they need to love because those who sought to oppress them were ready to mistreat each of those parts of their bodies.¹ Their bodies and their spirits had been used and abused by those with greater power. So the preacher calls upon them to think differently about themselves than do those who are in the majority.

The Apostle Paul could pick up after Baby Suggs right there from our passage from Romans: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be

transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

We hear a story of those who refused to conform to this world at the beginning of Exodus. We hear of two slave preachers, who preach more with their actions than with their words. They were midwives named Shiphrah and Puah, who helped deliver Hebrew babies during the time when the Hebrew people were held in slavery by the Egyptians. The Egyptian pharaoh had been getting frightened by the growth in population of the Hebrews, a group who had come into the land some generations before, some by force and some by choice. Misguided by his own fears and paranoia, the pharaoh instructs the midwives to kill all the male babies they delivered soon after their birth. Somehow this pharaoh’s instructions are not informed by Egypt’s own history, where some generations before, a Hebrew man named Joseph had gained a high position and set up stockpiles of grain so when a serious famine struck, disaster had been averted for the Egyptians and others. But this poor history-student pharaoh enslaves and then wants to practice genocide against the descendants of those who had served and saved his nation. Of course, midwives were committed to the well-being of the babies they delivered, and these two women, Shiphrah and Puah, were also committed to God’s will to protect those who were so vulnerable. So after delivering the babies into this world, they delivered them from the threat of infanticide, committing one of the earliest acts of civil disobedience on record, risking their own well-being in doing so.

But these Hebrew ‘outsiders’ aren’t the only ones who take a stand against the powers that be. When pharaoh did not get cooperation from the Hebrews with his plan for domination and genocide, he commands his own Egyptian people to begin tossing Hebrew male babies into the Nile River. But then we hear about an insider who also takes a chance in going against the commands of the pharaoh. It is his very daughter who, when she sees a Hebrew baby boy floating in a basket hidden among the reeds of the Nile River, refuses to conform to her father’s death-dealing ways. Perhaps her actions not as risky as Shiphrah and Puah’s resistance, but still it can be hard for insiders to refuse to

do what is expected. The unnamed Egyptian princess finds a way to offer care for this baby who gets named Moses. And we know a bit about the rest of the story of how God would eventually use him to deliver the Hebrew people.

A similar story gets told in the Gospel of Matthew when another baby is born into the midst of oppression and similar violence, where young children end up being killed in the perceived interests of the current power structure, this time overseen by King Herod. This baby, named Jesus, has parents who respond to the death-dealing ways of the political structure, and are able to take him to safety as a refugee, going into Egypt of all places. That child, like Moses, would grow up to offer deliverance in challenging the status quo.

Baby Suggs had told her listeners to love each part of their bodies. The Apostle Paul told his readers to love each part of the figurative body of Christ. Each person within the community of faith is a different part of the body and we are called to love and value each part of this body so that we can find our unity and coordination that enables us to function in ways that approaches the good and perfect will of God. There are forces within our society and world that have the capacity and even the intent of tearing us apart from one another, but we resist such forces as we value and love each person who makes up a part of the body of Christ here.

A number of you are aware that my mother suffers from Alzheimer's. The rest of the family and I have watched sadly as she has lost many of her memories that helped to define who she has been. At this point, she doesn't always remember the name of her number two son, but she knows she gave birth to me, and that is part of her core identity. She lives down in Richmond, and when I get to see her, she points at me and says, "You came out of me. And when I saw you, I said, 'Hot chalolly!'" She grew up in Texas and her expression may have been a derivative of 'Hot tamale!' but she has used it as an expression of delight throughout my life, and I am so glad it is still a part of her current vocabulary.

I have to imagine our heavenly parent looks at this body of believers, this body of Christ, and says, “You came out of me. I gave you birth. You are my beloved. Beyond having given you life, I am midwifing you, delivering you to experience a new birth, where you share my love for you with others, where you value each and every part of the body of your community, presenting yourselves as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to me. Do not take after the world – take note of your spiritual DNA and what I have modeled for you, so that you clearly know whose you are, and so that you will have the courage to stand against the powers that be that endanger those who are most vulnerable.” Friends, fellow members of the body of Christ, it may be a long process, but we are being delivered by our divine midwife into all we are intended to be. As that happens, I have to imagine that heaven itself is going to exclaim, “Hallelujah!” or perhaps, “Hot chalolly!” Thanks be unto God. Amen.

¹ <http://www.changethewind.org/2009/07/baby-suggs-sermon.html> which quotes from Toni Morrison’s novel, Beloved, Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.