

We all know that gentle stretching is an excellent thing to do... it can make our muscles more flexible and actually elongate them.....on a yoga site it said our muscles can elongate one and a half times their normal length by stretching! I don't quite understand how this works and can't imagine where all that muscle would go? But they say that stretching helps our balance and our well-being in our bodies and in our minds...in more ways than one. In our scriptures this morning....we are called to "stretch."

Let us be in prayer: Soul-stretching God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Moses dividing the Red Sea is a particular "stretch" for those of us who like things to be logical...of course the whole Bible is not very logical but I believe there are so many truths hidden within these stories....truths that come alive as we grapple with them.

So what is this Moses story all about? We have a very dramatic and miraculous parting of the sea...this surely tells the Hebrew people that God is with them. Kathryn Matthews writes that this was a "ragtag group of impoverished ex-slaves escaping their captors not by their own strength or wits or organizational skills or strategic planning, but by the power of God."

An angel moves from the front of the Hebrew people and goes behind them as they march toward the sea. Then a pillar of cloud that had been leading them, also goes behind them to form a protective shield between them and the encroaching army. It says the cloud was there in the darkness...but it lit up the night...keeping these two groups of people apart. Perhaps there was a bright moon shining through this cloud...An angel and a bright cloud separate them from their adversaries.

However, the story also includes the drowning of the Egyptians...an unfortunate, rather gruesome and politically incorrect event, in my mind...particularly distasteful because the scriptures say that *God* did this...on purpose.

Mick Comstock thinks these stories were written to *make* us uncomfortable so that we will debate among ourselves on the very nature of God. Would the God of love and compassion....do this?

Our Matthew text is all about forgiveness...seventy-seven times....Has God not learned about this yet when it comes to this Moses story?

Perhaps this story is about facing into our obstacles? The Hebrew people come to the sea and Moses stretches...stretching his arms across the water...and lo and behold, it separates...crashing and splashing it creates dry land in the middle with a wall of water on each side. Imagine what the fish thought, all of a sudden this big swoooosh! The Hebrew people now had a path to follow...between walls of water and they were saved from their adversaries.

What's it all about? Written by Jews, it certainly affirms that God was on their side and would continue to protect them...and that they are a *chosen people*.

We are not as comfortable today with the idea of "chosen-ness"...the thought that some people are chosen by God to be special...chosen over others seems to be the basis of white supremacy and privilege. Would a loving and compassionate God *choose* some people to succeed at the expense of others?

I do not think there is ever a very good outcome if some people believe they are chosen...better, smarter, more worthy...than others! Right? Some would like you to believe that "America" is chosen, is better, the best, to be the first, in the world. How ridiculous and arrogant... We all might have to do a little self-examining to check our attitudes of superiority, I know I do. Because I do believe that EVERY person is *chosen* by an infinite Creator...each one having unique gifts and talents and beautiful God-given attributes if they are given the chance to flourish.

Perhaps this attitude of "chosen-ness" is why people build walls. Walls separate today's Israelis from Palestinians and yet in the film, *Disturbing the Peace*, you will see how very brave people on both sides come together...to listen to each other's stories... realizing their common ground, and breaking down psychological walls.

Some want to build walls on our borders to protect us... from whom? Mexico is not our enemy. I read that a company in Israel wants to build this wall along our borders with Mexico! The guide we had in Bethlehem said that selling and building security walls were big business for Israel...Makes me wonder if Netanyahu is behind Trump's rush to build a wall!

What if we would treat Mexico as a neighbor and not an enemy? What if we were to see the gifts of people who are different than us? Most of us were alive to see the incredible relief when a wall was torn down that separated the people of East and

West Germany. If God can get Moses to open up an ocean, you would think God could open up hearts....maybe that is what this is all about....God *trying* to open up our hearts.

It is also about a blaring and daring, trust. The Hebrews run smack into an obstacle as the sea faces them. It was a stretch, for sure, to even imagine they could get through....and yet they move *towards* it, trusting a way will open for them.

Think of the obstacles in your own life... are there ways in which you have moved forward, trusting a way through? Perhaps you had to stretch the options, stretch your mind and even your prayers...and somehow, a way was opened, or perhaps an alternative presented itself...God wants us to move forward... stretching out in faith and love and forgiveness...even beyond what may be comfortable...and a way will open.

Rilke wrote these words: "Believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance, and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it." We can never be outside of this incredible love...even if we do not see it in the moment.

I have to briefly touch on the forgiveness story in Matthew... a servant begs his master to forgive him a debt, a huge debt! The master grants him this relief and forgives the debt, but then the servant goes out and does *not* forgive a fellow servant and throws that guy in prison. The master hears about it and says, "Wait a minute...I forgave you, why couldn't you forgive someone else?" And Jesus said, forgive not just seven times, but seventy-seven times...meaning all the time. If God forgives us, can we not forgive one another?

Forgiveness is freeing, as many of us have discovered. But sometimes I do not think we live in a very forgiving society...there was a story in the New York Times this week about a woman named Michelle Jones. She was recently released from serving a 20-year sentence in prison. As a child, she was abused severely, at 14 was forced to have a baby...and then she abused that child....and he died.

In prison, Michelle Jones studied...she didn't believe that her past made her uneducable and even while incarcerated, she became a published scholar of American history and presented her work by video conference to the Indiana General Assembly. She and a team of inmates had produced Indiana Historical Society's best research project of the year. She successfully completed college and now she is out and wanting to get her Ph.D. She was accepted at NYU but wanted to go to Harvard. While

they believed she was the most gifted applicant, someone in the administration was afraid of who might find out about her past...and it would look bad for this institution of higher learning. To me, Harvard would look so much better if they could embrace and celebrate a woman for her achievements and look towards her future and not her past.

Forgiveness...is a stretch, for all of us. Jesus knew that forgiveness opens the heart, it is freeing! Thomas Long wrote this: "We know too well that the little boat in which we are sailing is floating on a deep sea of grace and that forgiveness is not to be dispensed with an eyedropper, but a fire hose."

How I wish that our society could focus on what is healing and reconciling and renewing. How I wish that we could all regard one another through a lens of love and forgiveness...with hope into the future.

I will close with a quote from Nelson Mandela...as we move into our final hymn:

"I am fundamentally an optimist. ... Part of being optimistic is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun and one's feet moving forward."