

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Beth Orling
September 10, 2023

Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 149
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA.

Romans 13:8-14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

The Sermon

I wonder what was going on in the community that caused the writer of today's Gospel to talk about what to do when one person offends another. The concept of "church" as we know it did not exist in Jesus' day. Jesus gathered informal groups of followers. The writer of Matthew's Gospel – written over 50 years after Jesus (ca. 85-90 CE) -- seems to live in a more structured community.

As that community evolved, someone decided there had to be rules about how to manage conflict. Should the church point out faults, ignore them, seek to forgive? Some or all of the above?

Centuries later the psychologist Fritz Kunkel wrote about human relationships. "Whenever creation comes to a standstill between [people]...the reason for the breakdown is egocentricity, it is fear, greed, hatred, competition. But we have the ignition key to start the motor again. We ignite by forgiving." (from *Creation Continues*)

In Matthew's very next verses, which we will hear next week, Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive a member of the church. Seven times? That seemed like a lot to Peter. And Jesus answers, "I tell you, seventy-seven times." So we see that the community which was thinking about discipline a few verses before, is now urged to unlimited forgiveness.

The punishment for the offender in Matthew's community is beautifully ironic. We read, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Oops. The apostle Matthew had been a tax collector and Jesus chose to hang out with both Gentiles and tax collectors, in the loving hope of sharing life, meaning and compassion.

Scholars tell us that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, the book from which we read this morning, about 30 years *earlier* than Matthew's Gospel. Paul, in this reading, sums up, as Jesus did, the commandments into one saying, "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

Things to ponder and discuss!

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I cherish the verse about where two or three are gathered: there is Christ in their midst.

Sharon, Leslie and Laurie have taken on the leadership tasks for the Monday shower program, supported by many of you – who are seeking in the best way you know to show love of neighbor. Two or three or six of you are there with two or three or ten guests – and there is Christ in your midst. How? When? When someone sanitizes surfaces so the next person can be safe. When someone goes the extra mile of making a hot lunch, more than a sandwich. When someone sits down at the table and shares the lunch, listening and talking with the only agenda being the guests' well-being.

You may have noticed in our Godly Play class, there are always two adults. And regardless of how many children come – two or three or ten -- Jesus is in the midst of that classroom.

Today Jim and Connie are celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. “Wow!” we say. We know there have been many happy days – joy at births of children and grandchildren, but we know that not every day of those 50 years was a happy day. We know at least one terrible time, when Trevor died. We don't know the many other ups and downs that every marriage endures. We do know that where these two were gathered in Jesus' name, he was very much with them. He saw them through good times and great times, sad times and horrible times. Ask them at coffee hour how Jesus showed himself to them.

I would guess it happened as with many couples, at each breakfast table when one passed the toast or cereal or coffee to the other. Jesus was there when the babies were born and cried and laughed and got on their nerves and had birthdays and schooldays. He was there in their faithfulness to their church, again, through many ups and downs. We are grateful for their faith, their service here, their witness in the community.

When my friend and I sit down over coffee and talk, I know Jesus is there. When you sit down at coffee hour and get to know each other more deeply, I know Jesus is there. When someone messes up and you forgive rather than argue, I know Jesus is there.

When we honor creation, the natural world, and care for the plants and animals God made, Jesus is there too: as part of the dynamic trio of relationship we call the Trinity.

We will close our celebration of the late-summer season of Creation Care on October 15 when we bring our beloved pets to church near the day of St. Francis of Assisi. Gathering in the churchyard with them and one another, Jesus will also be there.

Jesus is present in all aspects of our life and our church. We come to know love more clearly, we come to forgive more readily, we learn to pray more fervently, we celebrate bread and wine more joyfully. We figure out ways to welcome and serve more creatively. We don't have time or need to point out one another's faults.

May God bless each of us as we learn to live more intimately with Jesus. May Jesus' presence at every dinner table be a time of joyful hope, wise counsel, and peace – whether you are eating alone or with a partner or with a bunch of noisy kids or with a friend.

When I'm alone at the table, I sometimes light a candle to represent the ones I would like to be sharing food with. I think we then are "two or three" at least, and that Jesus is there among us.

I'll conclude with a piece from our bishops' Creation Care resources, a little story from an ancient Jewish writing. (from the *Babylonian Talmud*, Taanit 23a)

While the sage, Honi, was walking along a road, he saw a man planting a carob tree.

Honi asked him, "How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?"

"Seventy years," replied the man.

Honi then asked, "Are you so healthy a man that you expect to live that length of time and eat its fruit?"

The man answered, "I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planted it for me. Likewise I am planting for my children."

In such planting, such working, such worshiping, such gathering, may we – with Jesus in our midst – plant for our children and for all children, for their faith, for their joy in work and worship, and for the creation and community we pray they too will learn to cherish and care for as they grow older. Amen.

