

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 6, 2020

Introduction

Our Gospel readings for the last two weeks have dealt with the implications of following Jesus for individual disciples. However, today's Gospel shifts the focus from the individual to the corporate dimensions of discipleship. *What does it mean to be 'Church?' How do members of a community of faith deal with each other?*

Jesus is a realist. He knows that his disciples are not perfect; but rather, human beings whose lives are overcast by sin. Unfortunately, this brokenness carries into our corporate life as a community of faith. Jesus provides a way of dealing with this brokenness that is consistent with *'being church together.'*

My meditation for this week explores the dynamics of forgiveness in a church setting.

It might be helpful to think about what it means 'to forgive' someone what has sinned against us. *Is forgiveness dependent upon the repentance of the miscreant?* While not pretending to write a *'How to forgive'* handbook, it is helpful to talk about forgiveness in a scriptural and theological context. For those who are disciples of Jesus, this raises several theological questions: *Why forgive? What happens when we are unable to forgive others?*

The answers to both questions are intertwined. God commands us to forgive others for our own wellbeing. Our unwillingness to forgive one who has wronged us can lead to something we describe with a very unpleasant word: *hatred*. We dislike using the word and prefer synonyms that are more comfortable. The words *'dislike'* and *'not care for'* seem much more acceptable to us. Sometimes, we even try to fool ourselves into thinking that our hatred is justified, moral, or even necessary for our survival. When we are unwilling to forgive those who wrong us, it is easy for us to dehumanize them, and treat them as the enemies of God.

There is also a personal cost for each us to bear when we are unwilling to forgive others. We have no peace of mind because we become victims of our own hatred; we *become what we hate*. It is ironic that the traits we so despise in others, soon become our traits. Their belligerence, close-mindedness, insensitivity, and their infatuation with evil [real or imagined] are soon part of us. The words of Jesus in Matthew are difficult: *"YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AND HATE YOUR ENEMY.' BUT I SAY TO YOU, 'LOVE YOUR ENEMIES AND PRAY FOR THOSE WHO PERSECUTE YOU . . .'"* For those who would follow Jesus, forgiving one's enemies is the ultimate test of faith.

In Christ ✝, Pastor Steve

Gospel – Matthew 18.12-20

[Jesus said to his disciples,] “What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

“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.”

“Litmus Test”

Let us pray. My pastoral prayer this morning was written by St. Francis. It is his prayer for the Church. Let us pray.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is discord, union;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek

to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and
it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I think that every high school chemistry student remembers chem lab and the experiments with litmus paper. For those of you who do not remember your chemistry, all chemical solutions are either acidic or basic. A 'litmus test' provides a way of determining what kind of solution you have. Litmus paper comes in narrow little strips and is either pink or blue in color. The blue litmus paper turns pink in an acidic solution. The pink litmus paper turns blue in a basic [sometimes called an alkaline] solution. With some types of litmus paper, it's even possible to measure the 'ph' of a solution — the degree of acidity or alkalinity — by the shade of color the paper turns when it comes into contact with the liquid.

The so-called 'litmus test' would tell you whether you were working with an acid or a base . . . An important fact when you're mixing chemicals together in the lab. But the phrase 'litmus test' has taken a far broader meaning in popular conversation. A 'litmus test' can be any controversial issue with two opposing points of view that forces a person to declare themselves one way or the other. The result of such a 'litmus test' can tell you a lot about a person or a group of people. Some of the 'litmus test' issues today are: school vouchers, welfare reform, religion, school funding, and most notably today, one's preference for president. *You can tell a lot about people by their positions on such issues.*

I would like to suggest this morning that there are also 'litmus tests' for Christians. Some are personal, like what happened to Peter and the disciples. When Jesus asks, 'WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?' we have to answer. There's no middle ground. Is Jesus who he says he is or not? *You can tell a lot about a person by the way they answer.*

Other 'litmus tests' are corporate. By that I mean they are addressed to the whole Church. Let me give you an example: Does the Church in America today cater to the comfortable, the powerful, and the wealthy who seek a Jesus who assures them that everything is all right? Or, does the Church deny itself, take up its cross and follow Jesus in lifting up the plight of the hungry, the poor, and the despised who live on the fringes of life? Is the Church smug in its success, or is it willing to take a risk for the Gospel? *You can tell a lot about the Church by the way its members answer.*

And there are still other 'litmus tests' that target individual congregations like Bethel and Immanuel. In today's Gospel, the 'litmus test' of a community of faith is how it deals with the problem of sin against God, sin against individual members; and our sin against others. Do we rail against sin and cast sinners out, or are we a 'hospital for

sinner's' who seek the forgiveness and reconciliation that only Jesus can bring? Like I said, you can learn a lot about a congregation by the way we answer.

Let's begin by talking about what the Church is. The Church is, first and foremost, a community of faith. We gather to worship Jesus, to strengthen each other with faith stories, to do mission in ways that we cannot do it by ourselves, and to celebrate the sacraments where we encounter God. 'True community' takes place when a group of people love each other as God loves them. This is unconditional love . . . A love that puts the needs of others before our own needs.

However, as with all communities, there are problems when human beings come together. Ego, power, and jealousy, get in the way of true community. Sin is divisive; it can separate us one from another and from God. Such communities cease to be the church and they become just like any other human organization. So, I think, the 'litmus test' for any Church and those who claim to follow Jesus is how it deals with sin.

But here is where things get complicated. Jesus has promised to be there 'where two or three are gathered in his name.' And that means we have to take Jesus' words about sin in the community of faith seriously. In our churches . . . in any church, those who worship together end up being interconnected with each other, and the sin of one affects everyone. We are connected through marriage, family, work, friendships, school, and church. And being this close together means that we can hurt each other. And our hurts are very real. Nonetheless, our temptation is to deal with our pain as the world does: we either ignore it; or we wait for the opportunity to even the score. The result is the same: either the injured person or the offender withdraws from the fellowship by default.

In today's Gospel, Jesus lays down a much healthier way for the Church to deal with situations where one Christian sins against another. Sin and brokenness within the Church are *community matters.*' Jesus said to his disciples, 'GO TO THE SINNER, FIRST BY YOURSELF; THEN WITH SEVERAL OTHERS; AND THEN WITH THE AUTHORITY OF THE WHOLE CHURCH. IF THEY REPENT, YOU HAVE GAINED A BROTHER OR A SISTER. . . . IF NOT, THEY HAVE BECOME AS A GENTILE OR A TAX COLLECTOR TO YOU. TRULY I TELL YOU, WHATEVER YOU BIND ON EARTH WILL BE BOUND IN HEAVEN, AND WHATEVER YOU LOOSE ON EARTH SHALL BE LOOSED IN HEAVEN. FOR WHERE TWO OR THREE OF YOU ARE GATHERED IN MY NAME, I AM THERE AMONG YOU.'

Again, let me say very clearly that Jesus is talking to members of his Church. He is not talking about sin in general; but rather, he is talking about sin *in the Church* where one member hurts another. This is not a method for dealing with the sinfulness of non-members. We do violence to Jesus' words if we go out into the world and denounce those we judge to be sinners. Today's Gospel is for the internal workings of the Church – those who are bound together by their faith in Jesus.

Today, I think, most of us find Jesus' words difficult to hear. Quite honestly, we find it very difficult to call a brother or a sister to repentance. We are just not into confrontation. Instead, we would rather talk to someone else . . . to give them our side of the story . . . to seek allies and isolate the one who hurt us. It is much easier to ignore the offending party and hope that they will just go away. 'After all,' we say, 'let them go . . . They are more trouble than they are worth.' At other times, our motivation is even less honorable. Perhaps, we do not like the offender and would just as soon not have them as part of our church. Thus, by leaving them to themselves, we also leave them to the consequences of their sin.

All would be well and good had Jesus not told the story of the Lost Sheep. All would be fine had Jesus not placed such a high value on his 'little ones who have gone astray.' They are of such great value to him that he leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one who is lost. Contrary to popular wisdom, there is more rejoicing in heaven when one sinner returns to the fold, than for the ninety-nine who were never lost.

Both then and now, the words of Jesus alarm his disciples. He makes it quite clear that we can no longer evade responsibility for his 'little ones.' It is not to be piously delegated to God or to the pastor. *Never once did Jesus suggest an authoritarian approach.* In each case, a brother or a sister in the Church is to approach the one who has separated themselves from the flock; not the pastor, not the president of the congregation, not the church council members, *but fellow parishioners.* According to Jesus, if God is unwilling to lose a single 'little one,' someone in the Church must get up and seek them out. There are no exceptions.

Sin is serious business. It is a condition of human life that works to our eternal destruction. Life, with all its successes and failures, with all of its actions and experiences, is devoted to either God or self . . . to righteousness or sin. The New Testament recognizes sin as a brokenness that harms relationships with God and with each other. To be forgiven, this sin needs to be recognized and healed. Sin is an exception to the kind of life that God intends for members of the community of faith.

Within the Church, such exceptions are out of harmony with the Gospel and must be addressed so that the brother or sister might not remain lost forever.

That is what 'binding and loosing' of sins is all about. Humankind is bound by sin. And because of sin, we are going to die. As members of the church we are called by God to be partners with him in the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation. 'Loosing' means breaking the bonds of sin that are slowly strangling us. Forgiving someone who has wronged us not only frees them from their bondage, but it also breaks the hold of that person's sin upon our lives. That is why forgiveness and reconciliation are so important in the family of faith. It is a matter of life and death for us all.

Difficult words; but forgiveness is the 'coin of the realm' in the Kingdom of God. Reconciliation must be the order of the day for every Christian who takes their baptismal vows seriously. The world's harshest criticism of the Church is that we don't practice what we preach. We are on talking about forgiveness and reconciliation, but weak at doing it. This does not mean that we cannot disagree, but disagreement becomes sin when we disparage another's motives, speak ill of them, or repeat half-truths or lies about them. Sin is hurtful because it adversely affects both the perpetrator and the victim – both are diminished, and both are injured.

The road to reconciliation is not easy. Jesus is very specific. The offended party makes the first overture toward reconciliation. . . . Forgiving as many as seventy times seven? Note that Jesus is present . . . 'WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED IN MY NAME, TRYING TO WORK OUT THEIR DIFFERENCES, I AM PRESENT . . . I WILL BLESS AND HELP YOUR EFFORTS.' It seems obvious to me, Jesus wants to keep the community of faith intact . . . No one is to be lost.

But what of those situations where reconciliation is not possible? What happens when a person's continued actions are destructive for the community? Jesus speaks difficult words: they must be separated from the community for a while. Jesus says that the 'lost' are to be treated like 'Gentiles' or 'tax-collectors.' This sounds harsh, but what Jesus means is that they are to be as a mission field to us. They are to be seen as 'God's little ones,' sinners like us who need the comfort of the Gospel. The ultimate purpose is not to discipline sinners, but to win them over in love. Church discipline is not a way of dropping people from the church rolls; but rather, it is a way of increasing membership and bringing people to Jesus.

But as Lord of the Church, Jesus bids us to seek the ‘little ones’ who are lost. He bids us to offer the good news of forgiveness and the hand of reconciliation. He bids us to remember that we were once ‘little ones’ he sought out. And he bids us to do whatever is needed to bring the ‘little ones’ home where they belong.

Do we pass the ‘litmus test?’ . . . I do not know; only God knows for sure. But I do know that Jesus promises to be where ‘two or three are gathered in my name.’ And where Jesus is, there is life and there is forgiveness. Amen. *Come, Lord Jesus!*