

ON BEING THE CHURCH; MATTHEW 18:13-20; RALLY DAY/SEPTEMBER 10, 2017; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Welcome back! Fall is in the air, kids are returning to school, our usual lives are resuming their accustomed rhythms. This is the Sunday across the land when churches are cranking up for a new year.

Interesting Scripture lesson we have this morning. The ecumenical, Protestant/Catholic committee that selects these passages doesn't waste any time. On this first day of the fall season, back from summer – the lesson today gets right to the point of what we're doing here.

Church means lots of things – worship, education, mission, fellowship and food; church is about committee meetings and budgets and volunteering – giving time, talent and treasure; church is about making the wider community stronger and being the voice of conscience when the community or nation faces hard times. A healthy church is active and engaged in these and many other ways.

But it would be unrealistic to think that all of that planning and execution, all of the logistics and gatherings and deployments happen free of friction; that we could be so busy and productive even for the best of causes with the best of intentions without occasionally stepping on one another's toes; that our 'humanness' wouldn't get in the way or 'go off the rails' now and then and offend or hurt someone.

Jesus is preparing his disciples (and Matthew his readers), by giving us a heads up for what to expect in the church. And, what we can expect, in a word, is trouble. Jesus gives his disciples practical instruction in their life together. He doesn't want them to be left adrift or subject to the dark forces if and when "your brother or sister sins against you..." as he says today.

Sometimes we assume that just because Jesus has said, "Follow me," and we responded with "Here I am Lord" that there won't be conflict and controversy in the church.

Indeed, the church has long been accused of "hypocrisy" by those, inside and out, who expect Jesus' disciples to gather only in warm, loving fellowship; but this has always seemed to me a rather shallow charge; *all* humans are hypocrites sooner or later – especially when they espouse lofty goals.

"Warm and fuzzy; nice and magnanimous" all the time is not how it works in the church or anywhere else. When I meet with couples to plan their wedding and they tell me how in love they are and that they have never disagreed or argued, I take that as a red flag; either they don't know each other very well or they are not telling one another the truth.

I don't have to convince you that everything isn't always 'hunky-dory' in the church but what today's lesson points to and provides for us is what it takes to be a *healthy* church. Meaningful worship, compelling programs, fiscal responsibility and outreach that matters – yes; but Matthew says it also takes *the ability to settle conflict and practice forgiveness* when we have hurt or offended one another.

I'll never forget when seven classmates and I decided to live together in our second year at Yale Divinity School. We found a six-bedroom house on Long Island Sound in East Haven, CT; it was September, we were invigorated by the prospect of another year of theological study and fieldwork.

After everyone had moved in, we scheduled our first house meeting to discuss what it would take to make our dwelling of seven a community and not just a place to rest and refuel.

In fact, we'd already experienced a minor mishap in our little commune. Whoever was assigned to do the first grocery shopping came back, unloaded the groceries and left, by mistake, two packages of chicken on top of the refrigerator. By the time it was discovered it had to be thrown out.

At the inaugural house meeting, we talked first about the easy stuff: class-schedules and car-pooling, a system of communication with notes on the refrigerator, a rotation for cooking dinners, even the date for an open house for our friends.

Then someone asked, "What are we going to do when somebody screws up? Like leaving three pounds of chicken on top of the refrigerator?" Frankly, I didn't see what the problem was. "Aren't we all headed into helping professions?" I asked, "and believers in the One who said 'love one another.'"

Suddenly, the temperature in the room either went way up or way down I can't remember which, but things got very uncomfortable.

Then Marie Fortune, who was a petite powerhouse of a woman from North Carolina and went on to found the Center for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse in Seattle and gained national notoriety as an ethicist and advocate for the victims of abuse looked me in the eye and said, "Tom, love doesn't solve everything!"

And of course she was right. Cheap love, cheap grace – people-pleasing niceness – smoothing everything over with smiles and platitudes doesn't go very far when someone gets hurt because of someone else's carelessness or selfishness.

Jesus wasn't about to let his mission and ministry fail for lack of honest confrontation when someone screwed up. He knew human nature, he'd seen his followers look out for nothing so much as their own self interest, inflate their egos, vie for his attention and favor; he knew people were going to get hurt even when pursuing the kingdom of God. So if they were serious about being committed to one another they had to be ready and willing to have the tough conversations to settle the rifts and hurts that arose in their common life.

Jesus gives his friends steps to follow if a brother or sister has sinned against them. The steps go from simple one on one resolution, to confrontation by the offended party with witnesses from the wider church, to expulsion from the community if the offender fails to acknowledge his wrongdoing. This is serious business. Being a community in pursuit of lofty, aspirational goals and committed to one another's best is serious business; it takes courage, honesty, humility and work just like anything we value.

It is worth noting the cultural backdrop for Rally Day 2017 – the nation is more contentious and polarized than in recent memory as the politics of the moment has peeled back a thin veneer covering huge ideological rifts across the land. This is not new; during times of uncertainty and crisis some voices always contend to expand their influence, and seek wider allegiance and the resources to retain their dominance. Yet, as familiar as this dark side of our national and cultural heritage is there is also another side defined by generous, magnanimous advocacy and support for the oppressed and disadvantaged.

It is not too much to say that a genuine ‘love of neighbor’ – in the best Christian sense – has shaped our proudest moments as a nation: from the abolition of slavery, to women’s suffrage, to laws protecting the rights of children, to the brief though bold episodes of racial reconstruction following the Civil War and during in the Civil Rights era, as well as legislative enactments protecting health care, old age, and opening the work place to all people regardless of race, creed, gender or sexual orientation.

These progressive measures have been influenced by the Judeo-Christian ethic of love for God and neighbor and come at great cost.

The church does not exist in a vacuum. American society is more diverse than ever before. Our diversity and reputation as a land where anyone can reach their dreams is what attracted religious and political dissidents to these shores in the first place.

Not only a system of checks and balances but the hard work of sorting out our differences in fair and equitable ways without any one group or person seizing the reigns of power is what ushered us through the break from monarchy in the 18th century, kept us united after civil war in the 19th century and preserved us from demagoguery in the 20th century during the Cold War.

We’re doing our best now as a nation to avoid falling prey to forces that would replace those values with opposing values. The success of this grand experiment as a pluralistic democracy, the success of the church as a community dedicated to loving God and serving the neighbor relies on the ability of a nation or congregation to settle differences fairly and equitably; and where forgiveness is practiced as the ultimate recognition that we are all human and have fallen short of the grace of God; and to forgive others as God has forgiven us.

Realistically this is not how we routinely deal with one another, so Matthew raises the bar on what passes for community.

He makes the point that anything short of practicing forgiveness will eventually suffocate the church. Firm action must be taken against serious offense. He is also aware that those who undertake to correct their neighbors are liable themselves to the sin of arrogance, judgmentalism, or hypocrisy.

Today’s story is bracketed by Jesus’ famous saying, “Judge not, lest you be judged” with the parables of the lost sheep and the un-forgiving debtor. The point is God is the final and ultimate judge and God’s aim is to save people not condemn them.

Jesus dares to tell victims of others' wrong-doing that *they* are to take the initiative, tell the truth about the wrong and give the perpetrator the opportunity to make amends. If that doesn't work, then they are to bring trusted leaders into the process. Too much is at stake to demur and overlook the wrong. We are to love our sister or brother in the church enough to want them to have the opportunity to be the best they can be, for them to know the full impact of their actions and to take responsibility when a relationship has been damaged.

Here's a simple example, a colleague preached a sermon that made ill-considered comments about a politician running for office. He disagreed with the man's policies and positions. After his sermon a member of the congregation said to him, "I was really hurt, even angered, by your comments about the congressman in your sermon."

"Are you one of his supporters," the preacher asked. "Not especially," the answer came, "but when I was going through a rough time with my son who was in the military, the congressman was my only supporter. I found him to be a kind, caring individual, and I think you were wrong to criticize him as you did."

Bingo. Connection at the human level. The preacher saw the congressman as a human being not just an ideological position. He was grateful to the church member for confronting him. Her courage to do so deepened their relationship.

Forgiveness never happens by default. It occurs in the risky encounter between the alienated parties. The Christian community has a stake in brokenness and reconciliation – not only in the liturgical declaration of pardon each week but in the actual relationships among us.

That's why Jesus says, 'where two or three gather I am there with you.' We are not just here to pray each week but to create the kind of community in which healing takes place and people thrive.

The real church is not a place without conflict. But it is also a place where we take responsibility for one another's wellbeing.

That's when 'community' really means something. That's when folks are trying to be more like Christ's body than a book club or softball team.

If we can be that kind of community Isadora and all of our children will flourish. That, friends, is something that merits a Rally Day! Amen.