



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, September 6, 2020
The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Matthew 18:15-20
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In the Midst of the Mess

I'd much rather be preaching about the woods today.

About the way in which God consoles us with the beauty of the trees - the trees which will soon enough all across the city and the state of New York begin to become that fiery bouquet of reds and yellows and oranges that ushers in the ending of the year. I'd like to preach about how in that beauty, and in the current lush green and gold of summer's last days, we can find reprieve from stress and strangeness even for a moment and taste the sweetness of God's abundant grace. But I don't get to do any of that today, I'm afraid. Because the lectionary has supplied us with this text from Matthew's Gospel instead - this text about sin and conflict in the church.

I know, right?

As it happens, we humans are not always very good at disagreement. We don't need to look too far these days for proof. We're a deeply divided nation politically. In recent years a number of analysts and pollsters have proposed that the country is more divided now than at any point in its history since the Civil War. And that division, all too often, manifests as vitriol, derision, mistrust and a kind of tribalism. Carefully curated social media feeds and partisan news sources that act as echo chambers full of only the voices we agree with. Name-calling and fear-mongering on every side of seemingly every issue. And demonization of those with whom we disagree. "Those" people are not only acting badly, they're irredeemable and must be shamed. "Those" people are not only wrong, they're evil and must be defeated.

The church is supposed to be different than the surrounding culture. We're called to a higher, harder road. We're called to resist the divisive and destructive tactics of those three ancient enemies of the soul: "the world, the flesh, and the devil."

So how do we, in the church, deal with conflict? With hurt feelings? With bad behavior? With sin?

Often enough? With gossip about the offending party. With campaigns, public or private, to undermine that person's standing in the community of the church. By splitting up into factions. Or else by ignoring conflict entirely hoping it will somehow go away. As it turns out, we in the church aren't all that much better at dealing with conflict, with hurt, with sin than the culture at large.

In today's reading from Saint Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives us some rather different instructions for dealing with hurt and conflict and sin:

"If another member of the church sins against you," Jesus says, "go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one."

If someone wrongs you, if someone acts badly, if there is hurt or disagreement in our community, Jesus says, our first approach should be direct, one on one. Person to person. Go to them. Relationship is the key here. Not judicial sanction, not institutional fiat, and certainly not sniping at one another online or behind one another's backs. Relationship. Discretion and care for the other and an urgent, face-to-face desire to fix what has been broken. To heal what has gone awry.

"But if you are not listened to," Jesus says, "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..."

Still, even as the list of participants grows the approach is still grounded in a desire to restore wholeness to the community. It is about seeking reconciliation. Reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel. As St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church says, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." Reconciling ourselves to God and reconciling ourselves with one another. Restoring that which sin ruptures and divides.

Saint John Chrysostom compares the effort to seek reconciliation to a doctor attempting to heal a disease. Of the unrepentant sinner, Chrysostom writes, "For the more shameless and stubborn he shows himself, the more studious should we be of applying the medicine, and not turn to wrath and hate. As the physician, if he sees that the disease does not abate, he does not slack, but redoubles his efforts to heal."

Is that how we see disagreements or grievous failures - in the church, in politics, in our personal lives - as illnesses, as wounds to be healed? Or do we all too quickly "turn to wrath and hate?"

And then there is Jesus's final instruction on the matter:

"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."

A ha! Permission, at last! Permission to send that stubborn sinner away. To cast them out. To finally turn that person into a "them" and no longer one of "us." Except...maybe not. Once again, when interpreting these lectionary passages, it is helpful to consider the wider context of Matthew's Gospel. And today's section is bookended by two parables of Jesus that may help us interpret today's passage. First, that very familiar parable of the shepherd who leaves his flock to search for one lost sheep and who does not return until he finds it. This story illustrates how Jesus pursues us - relentlessly seeking after our healing, our reconciliation even when we have wandered very far away indeed. And second, in response to Peter's question of how often we should forgive those who wrong us, the parable of the unmerciful servant. Illustrating how God forgives us and thus how we are to forgive one another. Lavishly. We are to forgive 70 times 7, Jesus tells Peter. A huge number. Perfectly huge. Our forgiveness is to be boundless, Jesus tells Peter. So are we really to cast out the unrepentant for good? I think maybe not.

Because what does it mean to treat someone as a Gentile or a tax collector, really?

In Jesus's day, tax collectors were Jewish collaborators with the Roman occupiers - taking money from their neighbors to ship off to Rome. The wider Jewish society in Jesus's day held them at arm's length, sure. Treated them as traitors. As defiled. But Jesus didn't. Jesus, in acts which were scandalous to the wider society, spoke with them, ministered to them, dined with them. Saint Matthew was a tax collector. And

Jesus brought him into his inner circle. So, if the offender refuses to repent, refuses reconciliation, treat them as a tax collector - which seems to mean: Love them. Minister to them. In Jesus's eyes, tax collectors and Gentiles were not untouchable. They were the lost sheep who our Lord relentlessly sought out nevertheless. And it seems to me that we are to do the same - with boundless forgiveness ready at hand.

And this, I think, is where all of this speaks most powerfully to our current age of political division, to a church which can all too often embody the same habits of being that surround us in our toxic public discourse. Jesus's approach to dealing with sin and conflict is to encounter the person, the **person**, and seek to heal what's gone wrong in the particularity of their circumstance. In order to heal our sinfulness, to reconcile us with God, eternal divinity took on particularity enfleshed in a human person and interacted with other human persons. Down here in the complicated chaos of community, society, politics, economics and religion. God sought us out in our humanity and seeks us there still today. One by one.

When people sin grievously, when they do things that we cannot stand, it is tempting to dehumanize them. To treat them as ideas personified (as Good Guys and Bad Guys...) and not as individual breathing, laughing, crying struggling human people. But that's what they are. Matthew became SAINT Matthew because Jesus didn't treat him like he was supposed to treat a tax collector. He looked him in the eye and treated him with dignity as a precious child of God.

It's a scary time. There are huge matters at stake in this country as we live through a recession and racial unrest, a pandemic and a presidential election all at the same time. And there are smaller but no less important issues here in our interactions with one another in the church, in our families, in our communities. In times of vulnerability, every scared animal brain impulse in us screams to fight or flee. To withdraw is easy. But that is not the way of Jesus. Jesus commands us to engage, to practice love instead. A love that costs.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Saint Paul says to, "admonish the idlers..." Yes - to call out bad behavior and seek to address it. "To admonish the idlers (but also!) to encourage the fainthearted, to help the weak, to be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil," Saint Paul says, "but always seek to do good to one another..."

We need to be people of faith, not of fear, my friends.

And that means not being afraid of one another. Of the difficult and yet necessary demands of knowing and loving one another. Even when we disagree, even when we are in conflict, even when we fail one another catastrophically, even when we sin terribly. Especially then. Especially then.

And, look, I'm not pretending to be above this. I get frustrated and hurt and I lash out or I oversimplify and vilify others. I'm a priest, not a saint. I get it. I get how hard this is and how good the other way can feel. But we have to ask ourselves what we want? Do we want to feel good or do we want to be good? Do we want to feel safe and righteous or do we want to be followers of Jesus who was, in the final tally, never safe as the cross attests, the cross which is, at the end of the day, the only measure of any righteousness?

It isn't only in the beauty of this world where the grace of God can find us and astonish us and transform us - not only in the fiery autumn foliage or the haunting, transcendent majesty of plainsong or Gothic architecture. God's grace comes to us as we choose to engage and encounter one another in all of our humanity even in times of conflict, even in risky attempts to bind up what has been broken. The Lord meets us there - in the midst of the mess.