

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, September 06, 2026

The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

+

A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz

on

Ezekiel 33:7-11; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

+

Basic Instructions?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

There was a time, relatively recently, within the last thirty years or so I think There was a time when it seemed as if Jesus,

More than anything else you might think or say about him:

He was an expert in personal productivity.

Also a really great coach. Life coach, little league, high school football. Or the best CEO that ever walked the earth.

(It seems a peculiarly American thing to confuse a CEO with God Incarnate.) I remember a raft of literature being produced

That was very interested in using what we know of the life Jesus To unlock or maximize our own inner leadership potential.

If you think I may have greeted this literature with some skepticism, well... You are absolutely right.

But here's the thing. I can't and won't fault someone for wanting to find in Jesus A pattern of good leadership

I can't and won't fault someone for looking at the servant ministry of Jesus and thinking "I wonder how that might work for me, in my life, in my job, in my relationships."

In fact, that sounds like a very beautiful thing: to learn how to serve your neighbor Love your neighbor

Is part of the discipline and formation, the ancient askesis of the faith.

My skepticism of this genre of largely Christian self-help literature Has less to do with whether there is a pattern of leadership to follow And more to do with the worldview that appropriates this pattern

In the name of productivity or prosperity.

A worldview that consequently looks at scripture as an instruction manual For a machine that happens to be your life.

If you've not heard that the word "Bible" is an acronym (or more accurately, a backronym) for: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth

I'm very sorry to have just spoiled your breakfast.

I understand that we want our faith to be practical To be useful

To help us, in some way, to self-actualize or to be or become better at what we do. But I'm afraid that's not what Christianity is about.

In fact, it can be a good way of keeping Christianity at arm's length. Our faith is not here to prop up our sense of self

But to pitch us beyond ourselves, towards others, towards God.

The faith is about being undone, learning to give ourselves up, to give ourselves away It's not becoming more productive, but more loving

And not because being more loving will help us get along better

Or will get us anywhere at all in this fallen and death-infected world But because love is what we're made for

Where we come from

How we're ordered

The fundamental truth of who we are, And to love is to bear witness to this truth.

Nonetheless, at first glance, our Gospel reading this morning

Can look and sound very much like helpful community building and maintenance suggestions From our very helpful advice columnist friend Jesus.

But that misses the point.

There is in our Gospel today a radical re-envisioning of human community

That is less the upshot of advice on dealing with or overcoming community friction And more about re-understanding human community, human life, completely

And in a way that is considerably challenging.

Our lectionary drops us this morning in the midst of Matthew 18,

Unhelpfully omitting those verses at the top of the chapter that bear most on our reading today. Earlier in the chapter, the disciples have asked Jesus: who is the greatest in the Kingdom?

And Jesus very famously places a child in their midst and says:

Become like this little one and you'll be great.

But this is no sentimental evaluation of childhood—

From the apostles' perspective, it's perplexing if not frankly absurd.

A child in the first century had no social status. They asked Jesus who was great And he showed them a non-entity, someone powerless, dependent, a nobody.

And then Jesus goes on to talk about paying careful attention

To such no-status, powerless, dependent, nobodies, considering and acting *for* their wellbeing

Going even so far as to suggest that we should alienate ourselves from those parts of us That would desire or accomplish injury to *anyone*,

But *especially* those who are powerless, dependent, nobodies, The least, the lost, the lonely, the last.

And then we have our reading today.

The whole context here is about de-centering ourselves Looking outside and beyond

Noticing, paying attention, to another, being concerned for another Nurturing and fostering another's wellbeing

Not because it makes us feel good, not because it helps, not because we become better But because LOVE REQUIRES IT. That's what love means.

"Love worketh no ill to his neighbour:" writes Paul "Therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

Wake up, says Paul, to this fundamental truth. Pay attention to the reality of your neighbor And you not only pay attention to love

But you become love, a living flame of love.

And beloved, from the perspective of our faith, How could it be otherwise?

Was it self-actualization that moved the Lord of the Worlds to set aside his starry crown To take our human nature and receive from us a crown of thorns?

Was it on a whim or merely on account of a pleasant feeling

That Jesus submitted to our blows, the nails, the spitting, the spear, our violence? Did he harrow hell and rise again because he needed to diversify his portfolio?

Was it increased profit or productivity that convinced the Self-existent Sovereign Source of all To behold the nothingness at the dawn of creation and call it into being?

Was it self-improvement that drove the Uncreate Eternal God to breathe life into inanimate clay And plant his own image and likeness at the center of the human heart...?

To behold us, who are, in fact, not more substantial than a morning mist, Contingent as we are, subject to “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”? What but love could move the Unmoved Mover not merely to create

But to ransom, rescue, renew, restore you and me and all of us, Powerless, dependent, nothing though we be,

Sunk in sin and drunk on darkness

And raise us, in him, to the heights of heaven, to clothe us in his own glory? What but love?

God gains nothing by my faith or yours

But by his love, his grace, through faith, I, we, gain no mere paradise But the infinite fullness of the very life of God alive in us

What but love divine all loves excelling could make this possible? What but love could make this real?

Matthew 18 is about how that love is meant to transform us, re-order us and our communities.

Our Lord is good enough not only to give us a new pattern of living in love,

But good enough to unpick the old pattern of death in us as part of this gift. When he speaks of conflict resolution in our passage from Matthew

It's not so much advice he's giving: he's revealing a new way of being community, And revealing a particular social idol that must be put away.

It's likely that the disciples here would be as perplexed with what he's saying

As they were with the image of a powerless person being the greatest in the Kingdom. Because, to them, what Jesus is saying is this:

Hold even your honor lightly. If it gets in the way of you loving or reconciling with someone? Be willing to lose it.

Given the importance of honor in Jesus' time and culture, This is a highly counter-intuitive teaching.

In Jesus' day, to give offence to someone, to trespass against them Had a very immediate and public dimension—

Because it challenged the honor of the one offended against. Honor is about public estimation and regard.

If, having been offended, you desired to keep your honor,

you would need to respond, publicly, to the offense, to the challenge.

Challenge and response in the heat of the public eye, could easily lead to more intense conflict To violence, bloodshed, and all premised, one way or another,

On resentment giving way to vengeance.

Suffering requires satisfaction. Suffering is ameliorated by escalating forms of violence. This is the way of the social idol.

What Jesus is saying here about speaking to a wrongdoer in private,

Speaking to them with witnesses Speaking to the church

Is not actually Jesus' bestselling strategy for healthy conflict resolution within the team It's a full-throated challenge to the social idol.

It's a way to liberate a community from this idol and the cycles and habits of violence it requires By inviting people to understand that their value, your value

Is not a function of public regard

But is a matter of the unearned and gratuitous loving regard of the One who truly does love you And who made you by love, in love, and for love.

It is an invitation to let love, real love—

Which is not a pleasant feeling but the difficult work of attention and commitment to the good, Another's good, for the sake of the good—

Allowing love to unbind in us and loose from us our attachments to resentment, To decenter in us the destructive desire to "get our own back"

And to look outside and beyond ourselves to a reality of healing that renews and restores

Even at the risk of being unheard and rejected. Because love works like that. It's an invitation to be part of a community unbound by rivalry and violence And that is committed to the work of mutual unbinding,

In other words: it is gathered in the Name of Jesus.

All this does not, however, guarantee a happy outcome.

In fact, the risk in answering this invitation to love is vulnerability, suffering—The risk of insult, injury, calumny, loss of status, loss of honor. Loss.

Becoming nothing in the eyes of the world.

But the risk in refusing it is just more death and violence. As Simone Weil puts it,

"The false god [which is to say: the social idol]

The false god changes suffering into violence. The true God changes violence into suffering." We see it in the cross.

Our Lord is not saying here:

It's important for you to manufacture nice feelings toward those who hurt you; It's important for you to expose yourself to wounding from those who wound you. No. What he does say, is saying, is this:

Let love undo in you the will to wound,

Let love undo resentment and vengeance in you, death in you. Start there. Then see what you become.

See what you become, together, in community with others who are also being unbound Who are also being pitched outside themselves, beyond themselves

See what becomes possible

See how you might be empowered to be and become an agent of this unbinding. See who you are not in the social idol's pitiless gaze

But in the light of God's regard for you.

Beloved, this is not easy stuff.

Our temptation will often be to attenuate the challenge and the risk

By appropriating the pattern of the cross, the pattern of faith, the Pattern of Jesus

To some well-meaning sense of utility, helpfulness, respectability, or practicality. It is hard to risk being nothing in the eyes of the world for the sake of love.

Other gods don't ask for as much.

The God of Love, usefully recast as Coach or Manager or CEO...does not ask for as much Though it will take everything it can, and hollow you, and it will not save you.

But God is not like other gods. And Jesus did not come among us to increase our profit margins Our batting averages, our social media numbers or diversify our portfolios.

He came to love us. Extravagantly, recklessly, completely. Love us. He came to free us from our bondage to sin and death

And transfigure us by, with, and through his love.

Love cares little for being merely useful, merely helpful, merely respectable or merely practical And it does not care for the social idols that embody these social virtues.

Yet even now, in every community gathered in the Name Love is casting down the great and lifting up the nothing

Love is turning the world upside down, and inviting you, in Ezekiel's words, to turn with it. Will you?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.
