

Sunday, September 10, 2017
14th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 18
Romans 13.8-14; Matthew 18.15-20
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

The words of today's Gospel reading are not quite what you would ordinarily expect out of Jesus' mouth. Rather than his usual message of love and mercy, Jesus lays out what amounts to a disciplinary procedure for the church – a way of dealing with a member of the church who is problematic, who has gone astray, who has sinned against another member of the church or the church itself. This procedure contains a number of potential steps, starting with one-on-one discussion. If that doesn't work, additional witnesses may be brought in. If that doesn't work, the proceedings elevate to what amounts to a trial before the entire church. And if that doesn't work, the offender is to be banished from the church. Seems kind of harsh. What happened to love and mercy?

In actuality, the procedure Jesus lays out is all about love and mercy. Love and mercy for the church, the community of faith and the individual members of that community. Of course, Jesus has repeatedly told his followers, directly or indirectly, that they are to love one another. That our mutual love is a hallmark of who we are as people of God and as the Body of Christ. We see this most vividly in our Epistle reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans, where Paul starts off with a somewhat cryptic statement: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Rom 13.8).

According to Paul, we have only one obligation, at least with respect to dealing with other people. That is to love one another. In fulfilling this one obligation, we fulfill the essence, the goal, of the entire law. Love encompasses the commandments against adultery, murder, theft, and covetousness, and all the other laws and commandments. When we seek to love one another, we automatically fulfill the other requirements of the law. Paul goes on to note that all the other laws and commandments "are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Rom 13.9). Only those who are capable of loving themselves can truly love all humanity as neighbors.

Loving self can be a hard commandment to fulfill. For some, even harder than loving others. But the two do go hand-in-hand, as both Jesus and Paul have emphasized time and again. Instead of engaging in those things we may not like about ourselves, Paul uses the image of taking on a new self. Of putting on the Lord Jesus Christ and living in light of the future God has in store for us. In putting on Jesus Christ, Paul is really alluding to baptism, where we die to self and are born anew in Jesus Christ. Where we put aside our old self, our old life, and take on the model of his life. Where we seek to live fully into our identity as followers of Jesus. To love ourselves as Jesus loves us. To love others as Jesus loves us. To love others as Jesus loves them.

In living into this new life in Jesus Christ, in moving to a place of truly being able to love one another, Paul reminds us that we no longer need to worry about how others fare vis-à-vis living the commandments. That is not our job. Instead of worrying about how well I am keeping particular commandments, and worrying about how well others are keeping particular

commandments (or not), we are to shift our focus to the practice of love. The love that is demonstrated by Jesus Christ. For even when – not if, but when – we fail, we have put on Jesus, whose love covers our sinful selves. Whose love and example helps us to turn away from our sinful actions. Whose love helps us to do that work together as a community of faith. Whose love is the model for how we are to live in community as the Body of Christ.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of both the beauty and wonder, as well as the challenges, of being in community. In talking about disciplinary procedures, he is recognizing that loving one another can be difficult at times. Just because we belong to the Body of Christ does not mean that we are relieved of the possibility for brokenness. As a Body made up of individual members, tensions and conflicts can and will occasionally arise that test the love we have for one another – even strain it at times. And when that happens, precisely because of the importance of loving one another, we do not to summarily cut one another off. We do not just walk away. We seek to continue in relationship. We take necessary steps to seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

Just as God, out of love for us and through the death and resurrection of Christ, has forgiven us and reconciled us to himself, in that same spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, we as the followers of Jesus are called to honor and uphold our commitment to love one another. When lived out in community, this means holding accountable those whose actions may threaten or do harm to a member of the community or to the entire community. The process that Jesus lays out is meant to emphasize the need to do everything possible to maintain the community, to restore it to health, to avoid schism. But it is not just about what is needed for the good of the whole community. This process is also about seeking to fully restore the one who might have gone astray. Jesus is emphasizing the need to provide all reasonable opportunities for repentance and reconciliation in order to maintain the well-being and unity of the community.

We take the image of the Church as being the Body of Christ very seriously. Just as we seek to maintain health of our own individual bodies, so too, do we seek to maintain the health and wholeness of the Body of Christ. For it is through the Body that we experience the fullness of what it means to be Beloved of God. We experience something of relationship with God through our relationships with each other.

On the importance of Christian community, Barbara Brown Taylor, the noted Episcopal priest, author, and theologian, writes, “Our life together is the chief means God has chosen for being with us, and it is of ultimate importance to God. Our life together is the place where we are comforted, confronted, tested, and redeemed by God through one another. It is the place where we come to know God or to flee from God’s presence, depending upon how we come to know or flee from one another” (Barbara Brown Taylor, quoted in *Synthesis*, September 10, 2017). Through his sometimes difficult words, Jesus he would have us do the hard work of loving one another. To do the hard work of maintaining community. To do the hard work of continually seeking to experience God through our community of faith.

In talking about community, we tend to focus on that which is closest to us, emotionally, relationally, and geographically. On our parish. On the neighborhood or city we live in. But Jesus reminds us that ultimately, our neighbors include all humanity. We see this most vividly at

times like we are living in right now. We are reminded that we are part of a much broader community. That our neighbor, those we are called to love as ourselves, include many more than just those in the pew next to us. Than those living next door or down the street.

Our neighbors also include Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (or DACA) recipients, who are facing the end of government protection for being in this country illegally – here by no will of their own, but who are trying to make a life for themselves in the only country most of them have ever really known. Facing the prospect of being returned to a country that for all intents and purposes is not their own, that is foreign to them. People like the Rev. Nancy Frausto, the associate rector of St. Luke's – a fantastic priest I am proud to call friend and colleague.

Our neighbors include the people of southeastern Texas who are attempting to rebuild their homes and their lives in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. Our neighbors include the people – including family and friends of some of our own parishioners – of such places as Barbuda and St. Martin's in the Caribbean, whose entire communities were completely destroyed by Hurricane Irma. People who have no home, no community to return to. Our neighbors include the people of Florida – again, including family, friends, and colleagues – who, even as we gather, are forced to flee their homes and communities to escape Irma.

These, too, and many more that don't make the nightly news, who are facing devastating, life changing catastrophes, are our neighbors. Those we are called to love as ourselves. Those who are part of our community of faith, our community of humanity. Our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are called to work for the wellbeing of these, just as much as we are called to work for the wellbeing of those we do know in our parish and civic communities.

Ultimately, the wellbeing of our individual spiritual lives are dependent on the wellbeing of our communal life, in all its manifestations. For it is the faith community that supports us and lifts us up as we travel our individual and collective spiritual journeys. It is the faith community that challenges us to more fully understand the Gospel. It is the faith community that challenges us to more fully live the Gospel. It is the faith community that challenges us to particularly seek to love our neighbors, no matter who they may be, or where they may be. It's a ripple effect. What we do here in this place, ripples outward, touching the lives of people who are hurting, who are in need of healing, who are in need of the hope of the Gospel, who are in need of experiencing the love of Christ in tangible ways.

Our readings for today point out that our relationships with each other, our relationship with the community, our relationship with all our neighbors, are at the same time holy yet fragile. Thankfully, we are given Christ's word that the power of his love will enable us to grow together and maintain the bond of love and mutual affection within our own community of faith and beyond, if we have the courage to follow his example.