

Sunday, September 17, 2017
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 19
Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35
The Rev. Sharon K. Sheffield

Our Gospel lessons for the past four weeks have all been part of a coherent whole. In our lectionary, it's far more common to get individual snapshots, rather than a real storyline. The last four weeks are different, however. What we have gotten is a real blueprint for what it means and what it takes to be a community of Christians, to be people all working together as Christ's followers. And I think it's important to look at these readings as a whole. So if you'll forgive me, I'm going to recap really quickly the high points of the last three weeks, and then use that as a lens for looking at today's readings.

Three weeks ago we heard Peter answer Jesus' question "Who do you say that I am?" The answer that Jesus blesses is one we all know: "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." So that's the first thing we have to do as followers of Jesus – we all have to say at some point in our lives that Jesus is the Messiah. I know that sounds obvious, but sometimes we don't take the time to say out loud what we think is obvious. So our first point is that all of us here, and everyone who is following Jesus, has said at some point that we personally believe that Jesus is the Messiah – or we've said it on behalf of the younger ones, whom we hope will say it for themselves when they're old enough. This statement not only affirms that we have a belief that is central to our lives. It also gives us a point in common with everyone else in the community. Even when we think someone else has "nothing in common" with us, there's that to hold us together.

Two weeks ago, we had Jesus telling the disciples what following him would mean, and Peter refusing to listen. What does Peter say? "God forbid it! This can never happen to you!" And Jesus replies "Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." So there's the second point for us to ponder. If we're following Jesus, we need in fact to literally follow him – to get behind him and look where he's looking; to follow where he leads us; to be sure, as far as possible, that we're setting our minds on the divine plan and not on our own human plans. Ideally, the two will go together – our human plans will be divinely inspired and will help to build the kind of community and the kind of world that God wants. But part of saying that Jesus is the Messiah is agreeing that we're going to let Jesus be the center of the community and the inspiration for our actions. Sometimes that means taking something on for the good of the community, because that's what Jesus needs us to do. And sometimes that means getting out of the way for someone else to use their gifts, because *that's* what needs to happen. Sometimes neither action is easy or comfortable, but we do it because we have our sights fixed on God and God's plan, and not on ourselves.

So far, so good. But we know, since we're all human, that we're going to fall down occasionally; that we're not going to understand something, or we're going to have different ideas than those around us, or we're going to need to do something that's difficult. This can – and often does – lead to conflict within the community. So last week's Gospel is all about what to do when there's conflict. And notice I said when, not if – because that's what Jesus did. Jesus was

quite aware that conflict is just part of life together, whether “together” means two people or two hundred or two thousand. Conflict happens, and conflict can be healthy. What makes us Christian is not a lack of conflict, but how the community responds when there is conflict. So dealing with conflict in a Christian manner means talking it out, openly and honestly, and working as a community to resolve conflict in a way that shows we understand what Jesus would do in that situation. Where two or three are gathered, Christ is there – and so we need to let Christ be part of conflict resolution, just as, ideally, Christ is part of every aspect of our lives.

And that brings us to today, and to one of the most important pieces of how we manage to do all of this. If we’re going to be the best Christian community possible, we need to remember two things from this morning’s readings: That we need to “let all we do be done in the Lord,” and that we need to let forgiveness be one of the central pillars of our lives together.

Let’s look at the Gospel first, and then we’ll wrap around and bring in Paul’s words to us as well. This gospel tells us how necessary forgiveness is to the life of the church. We all need forgiveness, because we’re all faulty human beings; we all will have sinned against God and each other. God has forgiven us our sins; that’s the meaning behind the king forgiving the impossibly large debt of one of his slaves. No slave could ever have been able to repay that kind of debt, and that’s the point – Jesus is reminding us of just how impossible it would be for us to repay God for all God has done for us. God has forgiven us our debt. Our part, then, is to turn around and forgive our fellow slaves in exactly the same measure that we’ve been forgiven – unstintingly and unceasingly. Forgiveness can’t just be an isolated act, you see – it’s not a “one and done” affair. Forgiveness has to be an ongoing activity, not only in our own personal lives, but in the life of the community as a whole. The only way the body of Christ holds together is for forgiveness to be a never-ending practice for everyone involved. That’s one reason why we pray the Lord’s Prayer every time we meet – so that we are reminded that we are to forgive as we’ve been forgiven.

Jesus makes such a point of the importance of forgiveness because he knows the effect that being unforgiving has on individuals and on communities. How many situations can we think of in our families, our workplaces, our churches, our society, where things have become filled with bitterness and hatred because of lack of forgiveness? How many relationships have failed because there’s something hurtful that hasn’t been faced and resolved? Too many to count, for sure.

And of course forgiving is not the easiest thing in the world. There are many reasons why we might not want to forgive. We may want the other to hurt as we’ve been hurt. We may think that they need to make the first move. We may not want to acknowledge how deeply we’ve been hurt. And that’s the hardest one of all to overcome – acknowledging our own hurt. But that’s the part that’s most crucial, because that’s really at the root of Christian forgiveness. Forgiveness isn’t forgetting what’s been done – there are many things that shouldn’t be forgotten. Forgiveness entails acknowledging what has happened, and letting go of our wish to be in control, to get back at them, to have them experience what we’ve been through. As Charlotte Cleghorn writes, “Forgiveness is making a conscious choice to release the person who wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment might be. It

represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution.” In the framework that I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, forgiveness means acknowledging that we are following Jesus and letting Jesus be the model for our lives, rather than setting our sights on our own desires.

And this is where we can bring in Paul and what he has to say about community life. He is warning us not to be too quick to judge others in light of our own opinions and ways. There will be people in our community who believe and act differently than we do, and that’s OK. In fact, it’s more than OK – it’s the way God wants us to be. There are people who think that community means that we always have to be in complete agreement with each other, but that’s not gospel living! Gospel living is the constant challenge of being in community with those who push us out of our comfort zones; it’s a life where we’re invited to listen to and learn from others who see things from different perspectives. We are all parts of the body, and that means we have different functions and different viewpoints, as God intended. The strength of the body comes in large measure from the diversity that we all bring to the table. And being in conflict is inevitably part of that diversity. So our call is not to “not disagree,” but to engage in honest communication and honest forgiveness to keep the body healthy.

I think this is what Paul means when he tells us not pass judgment on others, but to do all we do “in honor of the Lord,” giving thanks for what we have received and remembering that we all will stand in front of God when our days are done. Our mission here on earth is to follow Jesus, to build up the community so that we all can work together to do what we’re given to do. Different people will do that differently, and that’s OK. If we’re all following Jesus and all openly communicating what we think, what we feel, and what we believe needs to be done, then it will turn out all right. No, it will turn out more than all right, because we will have done all we do “to the honor of the Lord.” “Whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s” – our task is to remember that, and to do our best to let the Holy Spirit direct us and rule us, so that our work makes the world a little closer to what God would have it be.

This way of life is not easy, by any means. And of course I’m not the first person to notice that life in community can be a difficult thing. There’s a joke that has a reporter asking a monk what the hardest thing about religious life is, and the answer comes back, “Other people.” And we laugh, but I bet we all also remember a time when we had the exact same answer. “It would be so much better, so much easier, if X weren’t here!” But X is here, and X is here for a reason, just as we are. So we all have to make a space for others, just as they make a space for us. The Rev. Suzanne Guthrie imagines what it might have been like a couple thousand years ago: “St. Paul complains to Barnabas that he’ll never, ever again travel with John Mark. Paul and Peter are wearing out the old argument about eating with gentiles. John’s own parishioners acknowledge that he may be a great poet, but he’s a terrible administrator...” It’s the same story, then and now. All kinds of people, all with their ideas, using their gifts and exercising their ministries and getting in each other’s way. But can we imagine our history, our church, without these people? Of course not.

So it is today. And now, as then, we need to rely on God to help us do what we can’t do for ourselves. We need to remember that no matter what our differences are, we have so much that is the same. We need to remember that we are all trying to let go of our desire to be in

charge, and let God be the main architect. We need to remember to forgive others in just the same measure that we've been forgiven – gracefully, extravagantly, over and over again. May the God we all love and serve truly direct and rule our hearts, that our efforts may bear fruit in this place and throughout the world, and so that we have neither shame nor fear when we come to give an accounting of our lives.

Amen.