

14 Pentecost, Proper 18, Yr. A
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Matthew 18: 15-20; Romans 13:8-14

As you probably know, Paul's letters are the earliest writings in the NT, probably written in the 50's. Paul thought that Jesus' return to earth was imminent. That expectation is reflected when Paul tells the Romans to wake from sleep. "FOR," he says, "salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near." And in this section of his letter, Paul is telling the Roman Christians how to treat one another in a way that reflects the profound lessons they learned from Christ. OWE NO ONE ANYTHING, EXCEPT TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER, he tells them. That kind of love, in and of itself, is fulfillment of the law.

While Paul's letter is theological and somewhat abstract, the reading from Matthew is much more practical. By the time Matthew is writing, it's probably 20 years later. Jesus hasn't come back yet and the small groups of followers have become more organized – more church-like. And now the question of how a loving community handle dissent has become an issue. What does it look like to love a neighbor who has 'sinned against you'? When you think about it, if Jesus is coming back next week, we don't really have to worry about that – he'll take care of it. But if he's not, then we have to figure out what this loving community is going to look like on the ground.

Both the reluctance to forgive and the urgency to do so is captured by a story a father tells of his children having had what he called “a vigorous brotherly and sisterly disagreement” earlier in the evening. They had gone to bed unreconciled, only to be awakened at 2 in the morning by a terrific thunderstorm. The father said he heard an unusual noise upstairs and called up to find out what was going on. A little voice answered, “We’re all in the closet forgiving one another.”

Matthew’s community had a context for his advice about reconciliation. That advice was modeled on synagogue practices for cases of disagreement and dissent. And we have a context too, which is quite different. Much has been written about the quality of our discourse. To be more exact, about the fact that our discourse is declining in meaning and civility. Someone ago, Deborah Tannen wrote a book called *The Argument Culture* in which she pointed out that, even as we have become a more multi-cultural society, our style of discourse has degenerated into a kind of polarized, winner-take-all battle, in which not only the style of the conversation, which she calls, the TRIUMPH OF THE YELL, but also the content, in which exaggeration, puffing, spinning, misstating the opponent’s position, to say nothing of downright lying, have become the norm rather than the exception. She blamed a couple of things: one is the fact that we have come to think that critical thinking demands that we dismantle the arguments and positions of others without regard to the truth they

may have stated; another is that in what we call the search for truth, we conveniently ignore points we have in common and focus instead on areas of dispute, often pursuing and celebrating errors no matter how insignificant and finally, that we have come to delight in dismantling and destroying things like personal reputations or bodies of knowledge or institutions without regard to the years that have gone into building them up and without regard for the consequences of destruction. We are reaping, she claims, a climate of cynicism as a result. That book was written sometime ago, but she certainly was prescient because today we are indeed reaping the results of that kind of discourse. And all of this has been magnified by our increasing dependence on social media which, while it was originally thought to be the harbinger of a new day of enlightened communication has proved, instead, to be equally a means of mass dissemination of misinformation.

The same point about communication was made by an educator who pointed out that current arguments in education which exaggerate differences and demonize those who disagree with one's position completely obscure the fact that the major goals and major values involved in education are held in common across lines of race, nationality and gender. We all want our kids to be competent, to be cared for, to have a value system which upholds truth telling and which discourages things like lying and cheating. But the quality of discourse, the way we and our political leaders talk about this, puts us at one

another's throats and obscures the existence of any common agenda.

When I was in seminary, which was a long time ago now, some of us spent a week at the monastic community at Taize in France. As you may know, this is a men's community, made up of monks from every Christian denomination and from most countries and nationalities. There is incredible diversity, but they have a common focus and a common agenda – to show the world that the diversity and difference can coexist with and under Christ; that Christians can indeed love and respect one another. Our group had a number of conversations with the monks and at one of them, I asked how decisions were made in the community. I was astute enough to recognize that a majority vote probably wouldn't work, but I thought that perhaps talking until they reached consensus would be the preferred method. So I was surprised when the monk looked at me and simply said: when we have a decision to make, we LISTEN to one another and when we have listened long enough and deeply enough, our direction is usually clear. We LISTEN to one another – not, we talk until all the points are made, or until the weaknesses in another's logic are pointed out, or until I've finally convinced you that my way is right, or until we're too tired of arguing to care – no. We LISTEN to one another.

And so we are challenged to think about our disagreements and the kind of speech we use to express those disagreements. I remember reading somewhere,

and it's borne out in this morning's lesson, that we should never criticize someone unless we're doing it out of love – love for the person and love for the larger community. But I think it's safe to say that most critical speech doesn't happen because we love somebody. It's more likely to happen because someone is stepping on our toes or interfering with our agenda or standing in our way.

I mentioned Scott Peck in a different context several weeks ago. In his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, he talks about the kind of confrontation Matthew is envisioning. And he suggests that whenever we confront someone, we are saying, in essence, "I am right and you are wrong." If the speaker is coming from a place of arrogance, that kind of criticism is not going to go anywhere, except to increase estrangement and anger. But if the speaker is coming from a place of humility, having first made sure, to borrow from another scripture, that he or she has removed the log from their own eye, then there is the change for a genuine conversation, a chance for forgiveness, a chance for loving connection.

I know it sounds simplistic, but I remember hearing a little formula for speech that I have undoubtedly shared with you before. It sets out three filters, so to speak, and suggests that, before you speak, you ask yourself, IS WHAT I AM ABOUT TO SAY TRUE? If not, of course, that's the end of it. But if it IS true, then there's the second question: IS IT NECESSARY THAT I SAY THIS? And, if so, then the third question comes into play, CAN IT BE

SAID KINDLY? I think things would be a lot quieter if we were to use these filters!

Paul and Matthew are both concerned with the survival and growth of the Christian community. Note what's necessary in Matthew: there's the common focus and goal, the measuring stick by which disagreements are handled – this isn't just any community, it's a group that is gathered in the name of Jesus, a group that knows that Jesus is right there among them. And that kind of group is going to behave in a way that reflects the love they learned from him.

When we approach the Lord's table and share in the gift of his body and blood together, we're participating in the most powerful sign and the most powerful reality of that beloved community. It should show forth our oneness and our discipleship.

Let me close by sharing a story told by Sam Portaro, who was the Episcopal chaplain at the University of Chicago for many years. He tells of being at a student conference of several hundred Episcopal students and clergy. There were many spirited discussions, small groups, opportunities for worship - it was, he said, a powerful and wonderful gathering, until at a party one night, there was a dispute over the choice of music. Tempers flared, racial and sexist remarks were made and the tensions within the community exploded. The police were called – all the while most of the students were in bed. The next morning, when the community gathered for Eucharist, rumors were

flying. It was clear that something was very wrong. When the presider came in, he asked for quiet, and he told the assembled group that the life of the community had been fractured by verbal and physical violence. He continued by saying that the Eucharist was a celebration of reconciliation and that this Eucharist would not begin, would not be celebrated, unless there was reconciliation within the group. He extinguished the candles and sat down. Portaro said that there was an interminable silence. And he remembered his heart pounding so loudly that he thought everyone could hear it. This was worship, he thought, totally out of control, beyond the safe and predictable bounds of the written corporate confession and the rote absolution.

After what seemed like an eternity, a young man rose to his feet and in a quiet voice identified himself as someone who had become angry and shouted a racial slur at a black woman and he asked her if she would stand to signify that she accepted his apology. She did. Slowly others stood and, one at a time, confessed their own contributions to the community's brokenness. It went on a long time, Portaro said, and there were lots of tears, but there was also forgiveness and reconciliation.

Reconciliation, healing, unity, love – all because of Christ who lives among us.