

Matthew 18: 15-20 “Before You Unfriend” Rev. Janet Chapman 9/10/17

The majority of my ex-husband’s family live in Tampa – they have for many years.

Although we have been separated by the pain of divorce as well as distance, I still hold a very special place in my heart for Rosalee and Ray, my ex’s siblings, and their families. My ex’s parents hosted us many times in their home before they died – there were multiple trips to the magnificent Disney World and the white soft sand beaches of Florida. On what would have been our 29<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, I am worried about them, but sadly I can only communicate with my sister-in-law Rosalee because Ray and his wife unfriended Mikayla, Ivy and myself during the political election. I can understand my daughters who, in their typical young adult brash abrasiveness, got a bit crazy online, but I tried to stay somewhat sane in my comments without drawing lines in the sand. But it wasn’t enough for them and it became an either/or mandate – either I agree with their statements or they would break off any contact. It was heart wrenching and in days like today, I grieve even more that I cannot directly lend my support and love via the wavelengths that used to be available. As waves crash into Tampa Bay, I struggle with the scripture handed to me by the 3 year rotational lectionary this morning.

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, and particularly these 6 verses, Jesus underscores the importance of community, especially Christian community. Speaking to his disciples, he lets them know that their faith is not a private matter, something they can go off by themselves and enjoy all alone under a tree. Their life in Christ is a community affair, something that happens when two or three of them are gathered together in his name. It is made clear that this is the time when he promises to be in their midst, and not necessarily when they are off by themselves feeling holy. He lets them know that they need each other because two heads are better than one; they need each other because they can accomplish

more together than they can apart. They need each other like brothers and sisters, even in-laws, need each other, to remind themselves that they belong to one family. When families work right, they are God's way of teaching us important things, like how to share and work together, how to take care of each other, how to agree to disagree. A healthy family has a way of smoothing out rough edges by making us rub up against each other, like tumbling pebbles in the rough surf. Living with others, we learn that we cannot have everything our own way. We learn to compromise, giving up some things so that others can have some and while it is never easy, learning this give and take is part of learning how to be fully human.

However, some families don't work right. They are not schools in forbearance and forgiveness, but reformatories where rules are more important than people, and where the first rule is silence, silence about anything unpleasant or untoward. If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all, don't air out your dirty laundry, and if you have a problem with someone, keep it to yourself, because harmony – even the illusion of harmony – is the most important thing in the world. It is more important than telling the truth, more important than your feelings, and more important, finally, than you. This is the lesson many families teach whether they realize it or not. In today's reading, Jesus lets us know that is not how the Christian family, how the Christian community, works. The truth is that we may say we want authentic and honest community, but we have no idea how difficult that is to come by. After all, community is one of those "feel-good" words that draws us into idealism. We imagine something out of that old TV show, "Cheers," a place where you're accepted for who you are, where you're never lonely, and where, of course, everyone knows your name. But the difficult thing about community is that it is made up of people. And people, not you and me of course,

can sometimes be difficult, challenging, selfish, and unreliable. This means that sometimes when we are daydreaming about community, we are prompted to do so because we don't particularly like the people we are currently a part of. So it is into this reality that Jesus, according to Matthew, speaks and he doesn't mince words.

He is basically telling us that people hurt other people, they miss the mark of how to live in relationship to others, also known as sin, and all communities are made up of these sinning people. When such a thing happens, do something about it; namely, go talk to the other person directly like a mature adult rather than behind his or her back. If that doesn't work, involve some others in the community, not like a gathering of witnesses to gang up on the offender, but rather as a way to involve and preserve the larger community that is affected by the dispute. If that doesn't work, then things are serious and you are all at risk. It is hard to know what Jesus means by treating the offender "as a Gentile and tax collector," because realistically Jesus treated Gentiles with hospitality, respect, and love and don't forget, Matthew was a tax collector, so Jesus certainly doesn't mean to shun these people as some folks do. What seems more likely is that Jesus intends for us to recognize that one of our members has left the family; because the only thing worse than losing a brother or sister is pretending that you have not and letting that wound fester in your midst.

It is not just hurricanes that remind me of this reality, but it is the nature of trees in our midst. When I was living in Kansas City, it got hit by a major snowstorm. In the areas of town where there were lots of trees, the branches were bowed down with heavy snow, so low that branches from one tree were often leaning against the trunk or branches of another. But where one single tree stood alone, the effect of the heavy snow was different. Without other

trees to lean upon, the heavy branches snapped. They laid on the ground, dark and alone in the cold. When the storms of life hit, we need to be in community with others, and the truth is that the closer we stand, the more we're able to withstand the elements.

In C.S. Lewis' book, The Great Divorce, he paints a picture of hell that resembles how we respond to conflict amongst ourselves. Hell is like a vast, gray city, Lewis says, a city inhabited only at its outer edges, with rows of empty houses in the middle – empty because everyone once lived in them has quarreled with the neighbors and moved, and quarreled with the new neighbors and moved again, and so on. This leaves empty streets full of empty houses behind them. That is how hell got so large - empty at the center and inhabited only on the fringes – because everyone chose distance instead of face to face reconciliation as the solution to the fight. Likewise, as Matthew 18 teaches, when someone crosses us, we are called to be the first to reach out, even when we are the ones who have been hurt, even when God knows we have done nothing wrong, even when everything in us wants to fight back – still we are called to be community with one another - even when we find ourselves in that deserted center of hell, that place some might call Harvey or Irma...but others might call the neighborhood, the relatives, the cyber community, or even the church. We are called to act like the family we are, confronting and making up, forgiving and seeking forgiveness, healing and being healed, maintaining friendships through the thick and the thin, lending a hand and stability to lean upon, fellowshiping and having fun, laughing and crying, filling the place with music, merriment and mutual affection, so that one day, those far-flung residents might come creeping in from their distant outposts to see what all the fuss is about. And heaven will be found on earth once more.