

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalm 149

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

Recently, hardly a day goes by that we don't hear about some natural disaster in some part of the world. Hurricane Harvey dumped a year's worth of rain on Houston and devastated large portions of that city and the surrounding area. There was a typhoon named Hato in the provinces of southern China, but we don't have many details about the damage. There was a huge mudslide in Sierra Leone killing over 1,000 people. There have been floods in Mumbai. There was a devastating earthquake in Mexico. Wildfires are raging in Oregon and not one, but three, hurricanes in the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico threaten the state of Florida. What, may we ask, is going on? Is this the retribution of an angry God? Are we witnessing convulsions and the birth pangs of a new world? Are human beings themselves responsible for the conditions that make such disasters of nature possible? All very good and very thoughtful questions.

Unfortunately, there aren't any clear-cut answers to any of these questions. We can speculate, but we can't know for sure that our speculations are correct. If all these natural disasters are the result of the wrath of an angry God, we can all think of other places on the earth more worthy of God's wrath than the ones now suffering disasters. If it's the birth pangs of a new world, we will not know until the process is complete. If it's the result of human activity in the world, we can not expect that God will rescue us from the consequences of our own actions.

So how do we respond to all of these events as Christians? In our gospel lesson this morning, we are hearing about the teachings of Jesus ... what Jesus asks us to do. Before we even get to the teaching that we've just heard from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Matt. 5:45)

For us as Christians, that's the difference. We are connected by our faith with the living God. We are connected to God through Jesus Christ who not only loves us, but teaches us how to love God and how to love each other. In the midst of natural disasters at home and abroad, we are still the children of God connected to the Almighty through Jesus Christ.

This morning, we heard a particular lesson from Jesus about how we are to be with each other within the church itself. It's known as the Rule of Christ. As we all know, there are no perfect churches ... there never have been and there never will be ... because churches are populated by human beings and human beings are flawed. The body of Christ in the world is made up of flawed and sinful human beings gathered around the heart and the experience of Jesus Christ among us. That's what makes the church unique among all the groups of people we have in our lives and with whom we find meaning. Jesus is the heart and the lifeblood of the church. And just like the body of any living creature, old cells die and are washed away and new cells arise to take their place and the body continues to live and breathe and have its being.

Because we are flawed human beings within the body of Jesus in the world, we have a tendency to bump into one another ... to hurt one another ... or to disappoint one another. Such is the nature of human relationships. These hurts and disappointments are rarely intentional, but they are powerful nevertheless. Because Jesus knows that these things will happen within the church, he has given us a blueprint from resolving those differences and mending those hurts. The body of Christ can't function well in the world if the parts are disconnected.

We have all experienced hurt and disappointment or even a sense of discouragement within the church, but Jesus knew that such things would happen and he told us what to do about it. The first step is for the person who is hurt or offended to say something. Jesus puts the initial responsibility for reconciliation on the person who has been injured. That's not always easy to do. It's hard to say to someone else, "My feelings were hurt when....."[fill in the blank of what was said or done]. That's where it starts because the other person may have no idea that their words or their actions wounded anyone. An overture by the wounded one begins the process of restoration. The offender probably isn't going to make amends or apologize if they aren't even aware that they have wounded someone.

Jesus tell us, too, not to give up on trying to restore the relationship. Just being polite to one another is not the same as loving each other. Being polite all the time or walking away from hurt or disappointment keeps our relationships on a very superficial level. That's not what Jesus asks of us. And that's not the way we function as the body of Christ in the world. A body is not a collection of disjointed parts. A body is connected parts all working together toward the same end.

So Jesus tells us that if we can't be re-connected to each other when we speak to each other one on one, we should speak to each other with a few other members of the body with us. This

is not about taking sides. This is about witnessing a conversation. This is about fresh ears hearing an exchange so that what gets said and what gets heard are the same thing. And then Jesus says that if this second conversation doesn't restore the relationship, the whole church should be involved. Keep in mind, that the object is to restore the relationship, not take sides ... not to decide who's right or who's wrong. Most breaks in relationships happen by accident. Someone does or says something that they shouldn't have or someone misunderstands what was done or said. Or even more frequently, someone fails to do something they should have done, but didn't. Have you ever gotten annoyed with someone for failing to say, "Thank you!?" The restoration of a relationship includes not only care for the one who has been hurt, but also for the one who did the hurting ... intentional or not.

At the end, Jesus says that if the one who has offended won't listen, that one should be treated like a Gentile or a tax collector. At first glance, this would seem to be Jesus' endorsement of turning our backs on someone. But stop and think for a minute. How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He embraced them anyway!!! Matthew himself was a tax collector and became one of Jesus' inner circle. There are multiple stories in the New Testament of Jesus lifting up Samaritans and Gentiles even though the Jewish world shunned them. When Jesus says, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Embrace them ... just as Jesus did.

But that last step requires an enormous capacity for forgiveness ... and that is most hard to do when someone has not or will not repent or apologize. It's relatively easy to forgive someone who says "I'm sorry" and genuinely means it. To forgive someone who does not repent ... who seems not at all sorry ... is very hard indeed, but that is what Jesus is asking us to do. It's not the person who is forgiven who benefits. It is the person who forgives who gains an extra portion of spiritual grace and growth. The forgiving person is the one who benefits.

But Jesus never asks us to do anything easy, does he? He simply reminds us that he is always with us. He reminds us that when two or three are gathered together in his name he will be with us. How can we miss if he is with us? Even if things don't turn out as we had hoped, how can we miss? Jesus says that if two of three of us agree on earth about anything we ask, it will be done by our Father in heaven. It goes without saying, that what we ask needs to be in line with the will of God.

As long as we are deepening our relationships with each other; as long as we are pursuing in earnest reconciliation between the members of the body of Christ; as long as we are two or three gathered together in his name, Jesus will be with us. Jesus' instructions to us in the New Testament constitute the best mental health manual ever written.

We are gathered in his name. He knows each heart. Each of us is an indispensable member of the of the body of Christ. Even as what he asks of us is hard to do, he is with us. When we allow Jesus to partner with us, when we do as he asks, He can do anything through us!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.