

'An Embracing and Chastening Love'
A Sermon for The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (A)

Owe no one anything, except to love one another. Romans 13:8

It's clear that the letters of St. Paul were written not only to teach a truth but also to correct an error. Even in his most exalted, poetic moments (I'm thinking of his famous ode to love from First Corinthians) we hear at least the tone of admonishment. 'Love is patient, love is kind' unlike your current behavior! Or here, in Romans: 'Love does no wrong to a neighbor' so why withhold it as you've been doing? You know who you are, and so do I!

The Gospels work in a similar fashion. There's the story of Jesus himself the narrative of his life, death, and resurrection. But there's also the story of the community which first received this narrative, that first came to believe in Christ. As important as his teaching and works were to those who followed him in his earthly ministry, equally important and perhaps more important is the effect his life and message is having in 'real time,' on those who are still following him through the Spirit, a generation or more later (Matthew's church among them).

It turns out that these faith communities were having some of the same problems that Paul's churches had earlier experienced. Principal among these is the problem faced by all families and societies of all kinds in every age how to live in unity and peace with one another when the other acts in ways contrary to the Gospel. In short, what happens when the sinfulness of some threatens the cohesion and mutual trust of all?

These are the circumstances laid out in our Gospel passage today. I've always thought Matthew here reads more like a legal blueprint for resolving church conflict than a universal moral teaching. There's more of Vestry handbook in it than Sermon on the Mount. Yet, still, it's a process based on love and respect and on the gathered wisdom of the community. And it shows what should be a natural reluctance for the church to condemn too quickly or judge too rashly. More than that, it tells us that we are responsible for one another. When we see someone we love wandering far from God, a brother or sister running headlong into danger, we need to say something. We need to try to rescue that member, even if they don't want to be rescued, even if they resist our efforts. It's just what followers of Christ do.

Now it's true, Jesus seems to end his teaching on a pretty sour note, suggesting a kind of banishment or shunning as the final response to a wayward parishioner. And it doesn't help (by the way) that this passage has served over the centuries as a proof text for the church's practice of excommunication! I do wonder, though, how much of this is Matthew and how much of it is Jesus? I think our Lord's own mind will fall somewhere between doing all we can to rescue those lost sheep and at the same time accepting (sadly but honestly) that some will choose to remain lost. In the end, the Body of Christ needs to be strong and unified, its collective love directed toward the health and welfare of all those in peril, in a world that daily sighs under the weight of sin and wrong.

It's a delicate balance, to be sure, and a stern challenge. But with grace it's not an impossible task. Take as an example the chastening love shown by Julia Jackson, Jacob Blake's mother someone with every reason to condemn and so little to praise, every reason to banish from her heart a society and a nation so poisoned, so unrepentant. And yet as her paralyzed son fights

to recover from wounds inflicted by a policeman's bullets, what does she tell us, through her pain and righteous tears?

'As I pray for my son's healing physically and emotionally and spiritually,' she says, 'I have also been praying for our country. . . . We are the United States. Have we been united? To all the police officers, I'm praying for you and your families. To all the citizens, to my Black and brown sisters and brothers, I'm praying for you. . . . Everybody let's use our hearts, our love, and our intelligence to work together to show the rest of the world how humans are supposed to treat each other. America is great when we behave greatly.'

I can't recall another person whom tragedy has pushed into the public eye who has expressed the mind of Christ with braver eloquence or more obvious conviction. She inspires and shames us all. But, like Christ, she does not leave us bereft and alone to perish in our sins. Julia Jackson holds out hope, as does our Lord when he concludes this rather edgy gospel with a familiar and beloved promise: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name,' he says, 'I am there among them.'

There is where the community of faith must dwell. There is where the Church needs always to be. There is where we find ourselves this morning, and on every morning and day and hour that we live our lives beneath God's own correcting hand and in the light of God's own chastening love; each time and season that we answer the call to serve and to care and to give of ourselves.

And if we must admonish, if we must correct and guide our sisters and brothers and expecting them to do the same for us it is but out of love. As Julia Jackson has said, 'it is to show the rest of the world how humans are supposed to treat each other.' For, indeed, in the end, her answer is as certain as it is true: With God's help, we are great when we behave greatly.

Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +