

Church of the Divine Love

Homily Sunday September 6th, 2020

Exodus 12: 1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13: 8-14; Matthew 18: 15-20.

The work of the reconciliation.

Today's reading from the gospel of Matthew is part of a larger teaching on how to live in the Kingdom of God. In this passage, Jesus teaches us how to resolve conflicts so we can live together in peace. This section of Matthew speaks to us all being the body of Christ and that we are all of value in the eyes of God. It is about how we treat each other and how we are to best live as the family of God. We are in community together, and because we are all sinners, it means we are going to bump up against each other from time to time. We are going to disagree with one another from time to time. We are going to hurt each other occasionally. When that happens, Jesus gives us a means for getting reconnected, for making peace, for becoming whole again.

The passage from Matthew 18:15-20 was intended to give the early church guidance about how to deal with conflict and broken relationships. The first step toward reconciliation involves listening. Sometimes what we hear is not actually what was said. A good example is gossip. Several different stories or rumors often result from one story or incident. True listening means going to the other person. In other words, we are to take the first step. This is often painful, but it is necessary if there is to be any hope of reconciliation, forgiveness and peace. If a relationship is important to us, sooner or later we will need to swallow our pride.

In the words of a Jesuit martyr, "The natural world is for everyone, without borders. God's table is a common table, big enough for everyone, each with a seat, so that each one can come to the table to eat". The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross changes our concept of the role of violence in God's protection of us; that is, violence is not a tool of our protection but rather our protection absorbs and transcends violence.

The process of reconciliation is made easier by the knowledge that God is with us if we come together in his name during the process. God is with us whenever two or three are gathered together in his name. God sustains us even when there is no hope. When we turn to the deepest center of our hearts, we will find God and hope will spring forth. Reconciliation without God is not true reconciliation. It is merely peacemaking. When a believing community works to settle disputes, Christ is in our midst working to achieve the same goal. He is the ultimate peacekeeper and peacemaker. He is the role model for peacekeeping forces in trouble spots worldwide. Just like Christ laid down his life to reconcile us to God, peacekeepers are prepared to lay down their lives to bring peace and reconciliation to warring parties.

Matthew's purpose was to make everything in the early church perfect. After all, he was a tax collector, and we all know how modern-day tax collectors like to have everything perfect and in order, especially when they want our hard-earned tax dollars! Matthew and Jesus wanted to restore order among believers. That's why Matthew included these words from Jesus in his gospel. That does NOT mean that they went to the extremes the Pharisees did by making up rules to cover every potential situation. On the contrary, Jesus liked to keep things simple. That's why he replaced the Ten Commandments with the two Great Commandments—"Love God and love people". Reconciliation is easier to do if we keep these two Great Commandments in mind.

Although reconciliation is a desirable goal, there are times when it is not possible or desirable. For example, at the time I'm preparing this sermon, it will be only a few days until the world marks the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. No one in his or her right mind would want to forgive or reconcile with the perpetrators after they committed mass murder.

Jesus isn't interested in who is right or who is wrong. He only cares about getting a broken relationship fixed. Our concerns about who is right and who is wrong often lead to giving up on relationships with others. Our natural response is to wage war with the other person, but that's not part of the blueprint God has for our lives—and that blueprint is the Bible. God's blueprint for our lives includes having conflicting parties sit down face to face and reconcile. The process of reconciliation is helped by prayer. When we are involved in conflict, we need to seek direction in prayer. If an outcome or resolution is reached through prayer, it will be accepted by God. Living a Christian life within a community of faith is not easy and demands some maturity from us. We have to determine how to love one another. It is more than being nice. Real love in our world requires informed thought and tough choices.

Matthew 18:15-20 is not meant to be taken as permission for those in authority to harm others or abuse their power. It is about listening, accountability and a larger vision of God's kingdom. It is about being accountable to others for the power we hold. It is about using the power of God's kingdom to care for the least and most vulnerable. The Holy Spirit lives in each and every one of us, but Jesus promises to be with us in a unique and special way when we gather in His name for worship, service and mutual encouragement. He is in our midst when we work together to right wrongs. Forgiveness and justice should characterize the Christian community. If it does, others will recognize something unique about the church and might even recognize Christ alive and active in our midst doing what isn't "do-able" without him.

Some of you might have heard of a country song entitled, "Anyway." It reminds us of how we are to treat each other as Christians, and it also sums up how and why Jesus wants us to resolve conflicts. I'd like to share some of its words as I close my message.

People are illogical, unreasonable and self-centered, Love them anyway.

If you are good, people will accuse you of ulterior motives, Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness will make you vulnerable, Be honest and frank anyway.

People really need help, but may attack you if you help them, Help them anyway.

In the final analysis, it's between you and God, It was never between you and them anyway.

The late Jack Layton put it another way in the last letter that he wrote to Canadians before he died. He wrote, "My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving and optimistic, and we'll change the world". If we remember his words and the words of Jesus, especially when we are in conflict with our fellow man, we will change the world. Loving our neighbors fulfills any and every other divine command, for genuine love does no harm to its neighbors.

Amen!