

Community and Forgiveness

A sermon preached by Anne Carey at Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity, Vallejo, CA
September 4, 2011

Texts: Ezek 33: 7-11
Rom 13: 8-14
Mt 18: 15-20

One of the many joys of being able to share some reflections with you on these recent Sunday mornings has been the opportunity to become acquainted with many of the writings of Martin Luther. I have gained such an appreciation for the depth of his insights into the Scriptures as well as the human condition. So I laughed, in that way we do when we recognize ourselves in someone else's observations, I laughed when I read this sentence this week in one of Luther's writings: "No one ever gets to the point of knowledge where it is not necessary to admonish him -- continually to urge him -- to new reflections upon what he already knows." Not the most elegantly written sentence, but if you can get past the double negative, Luther is saying that however much you think you might know about something, there's always more to be learned. Point taken! As a student of the Bible for pretty much all my life, I've read it through more than once, so I might claim to "know" its contents, and still each time I approach the readings for the week, I am astounded by their newness for me.

The readings for today are no exception. Taken all together, we might say that they provide an instruction manual for life together in faith. There is the prophetic voice of Ezekiel, who is to warn Israel when they are going off the rails. There is the pastoral voice of Paul, reminding the little church at Rome about the necessity of loving the neighbor. And there is the counsel of Matthew, giving words to Jesus about how to handle conflict within the tribe. Again, Jesus the management consultant! In each of these three cases we have the biblical writers

addressing situations that have the potential for harm to the community. It's that theme of life together, life in community: real, honest-to-goodness, authentic, faith-filled community.

Ah, community! It's something we all say we want, and at the same time we know how difficult it is to come by. We long for the personal nurture that community represents, and we speak of "life together" in terms that bear small resemblance to the challenges of that kind of life. We have sentimentalized and romanticized and idealized the notion of community to the point where it could not possibly exist except as (frankly) a dreamlike fantasy. So my favorite definition of community comes from Quaker author and educator Parker Palmer, who writes: "We might define true community as that place where the person you least want to live with always lives!" Apparently this is a definition that the writers of these texts, realists all of them, could have identified with. The question is not, how do we create, or find, that ideal community that we dream of? The question is, how do we help one another to build community where we are, in the nitty-gritty contexts of family, neighborhood, workplace, nation, or church?

Since we are a congregation of Christians, a strand of the Christian tradition, we have a distinctive starting point for considering this question, and that starting point is, not too strangely, God. You know: God, the almighty, the maker of heaven and earth and of all that is, seen and unseen. While we can never know enough or everything about God, we can intuit or imagine a few things (remember Einstein, imagination is more important than knowledge), and here Ezekiel helps us. We can intuit, for example, that God is not the mean, angry, destructive guy of the Old Testament stereotype, just lurking in heaven and waiting for the rest of us to make one little misstep before hurling thunderbolts of mayhem and chaos down upon us. The God of Ezekiel's telling has not death, but life as God's purpose. This God is pleading for God's people to change their ways, to choose to live in God's love. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God is

always wanting to save Israel from itself. We have a God who is, unaccountably, crazy in love with us! Why wouldn't we want to turn ourselves around for the sake of living in such love? By the way, that's not entirely a rhetorical question. Those who have studied such things tell us that the words we want to hear most after "I love you" are "I'm sorry." Do you think God likes hearing that too?

Matthew's community appears to have needed to deal with these questions as well. I've often wondered about the "where two or three are gathered together" thing, because much of the time it seems that the result isn't harmony, but conflict. Certainly there are differences of opinion, sometimes strongly held differences, within any group. My friend and fellow peace advocate Al Dean is fond of saying, mostly in jest, "I went to a peace meeting and a fist-fight broke out." We all know how toxic the climate within a group can become when antagonisms are left unaddressed. It's surely tempting to use this passage, then, as good conflict management advice. Many of us who have worked as employees or volunteers in all kinds of organizations have received training in how to manage and resolve conflict. Some of the training has even been helpful. And yet, as I've said here before, Jesus is more than our divine management consultant, and good advice is fine, but it's not the Gospel. So we have to look at the context of our reading, what comes before it and what follows it.

If you read the entire 18th chapter of Matthew, you'll see that the first part is all about valuing those at the bottom of the ladder: little children, the one lost sheep, and here the person who makes trouble for the rest of us -- that is, the person you least want to live with. If the ultimate remedy for sinners and difficult people is to throw them in with the Gentiles and tax collectors, well, they'll be in good company because that's where Jesus is too. Jesus, the embodiment of God among us, God in the flesh, shows us how to live and how to die. We need

to remember that he ate with tax collectors and healed Gentiles who recognized him as Emanuel, God-with-us. Jesus didn't exclude them and we shouldn't either. I always say that the company on the margins is excellent because that's where God is likely to be found. At its best, that's where the church is to be found too, hanging out with the left-out.

And then the second part of Matthew 18 is all about forgiveness. It's next week's Gospel reading, but we won't be hearing it in this place, so I'll trespass just long enough to quote Jesus on the subject. When asked by Peter how often he should forgive one who has offended -- should it be as many as seven times? -- Jesus just looks him straight in the eye (that's imagination working there) and says, in effect: "Are you serious? Get with the program. Seven times? Psh! No, seventy-seven times." Forgiven 77 times: that's what a crazy-in-love God does for us, maybe 77 times a day, just speaking for myself. By this seemingly ridiculous level of forgiveness, Jesus might be suggesting that the spirit of this process of restoration to the community that forgiveness makes possible mustn't be rigid or vindictive. When relationships are healed through honest conversation, authentic repentance, and lavish forgiveness, the community can flourish.

Paul finally nails this down when he marries the teaching of the Torah to the teaching of Jesus in this succinct summary: "Love your neighbor as yourself." That commandment, by the way, is original neither to Paul nor to Jesus. Grounded in the tradition of Israel, they're both quoting verbatim from the much -maligned book of Leviticus, with its long lists of rules and regs. Just goes to show you the wisdom of Luther's admonition about new reflection on what we think we already know.

Last week I heard a beautiful story about love of neighbor, and it rings especially meaningfully as we prepare to observe the 10th anniversary of September 11. Maybe you heard

it too on National Public Radio. It comes from my home state of Tennessee, where some religious groups have caused a bit of controversy over the presence of Muslims among them. This story is different. It seems that last year during Ramadan the Muslims of Cordova, 30 miles from downtown Memphis, couldn't find a place for prayer while their own worship space was being built. Pastor Steve Stone put a sign outside his church that said, "Heartsong Church welcomes Memphis Islamic Center to the neighborhood," and he invited the Muslim community to conduct their Ramadan prayers in Heartsong's worship space. A strong relationship developed over the past year between Heartsong and their Muslim neighbors, and once a month, they get together to help the homeless in their neighborhood. Next Sunday, on September 11, the two communities are cooperating with the Red Cross in a blood drive. Pastor Stone said, " On the day a decade ago when so many senselessly lost lives due to fear and ignorance hardened into hatred, we are sharing life with each other, and with all those who will benefit from our gifts to them. For Heartsong it is a witness to our faith." They didn't do any of this because it was nice; in fact, about 20 people left the church over the Ramadan invitation. They did it as a witness to their commitment to follow Jesus. Wow -- what a moving example of how to love your neighbor.

It's been said many times here that a small Christian community like ours exists in a larger cultural context that is at best indifferent to us and at worst, antagonistic or even hostile. We have such a golden opportunity to model what it means to be church within this larger culture. As God's people, we have to be responsible for figuring out how to love our neighbors on a day-by-day basis. It's not just being nice when being nice masks problems that need to be attended to. Real love in a messy world requires bringing all of ourselves into play: our thinking as well as our feelings, our questions as well as our certainties, our faith as well as our doubts.

Christian faith has to be lived in community; no such thing as a solitary Christian; we need each other to help each other live what we say we believe. And in our situation, we can find a wonderful, liberating sort of oddity in following Jesus in this challenging and even adventuresome life. So the difficult work of building community is to be done as Jesus did it: not just for its own sake, or because it might make us feel good (often it doesn't), but because God calls us to love as God loves. "For God so loved, not the church, but the world." "God so loved the world." Will we do that too?

Amen.