

13th Sunday after Pentecost
September 6, 2020
Living Faith Lutheran, Sechelt, BC

In today's gospel reading, Jesus turns his attention to the community of believers. Matthew is the only gospel in which Jesus explicitly speaks about the church and therefore addresses some concerns of communal living. This week, Matthew provides a framework for responding to sin and conflict for the sake of restoration within a community.

It is inevitable that in a relationship, a time comes when someone lets you down. They may disappoint you, fail to meet your expectations, hurt your feelings, disagree with you, misspeak, or break your trust. This happens in all relationships and in all places—the church is no exception. Although these actions can be unintentional, occasionally relationships are scarred by purposeful acts of betrayal, abuse, deception, and malice. In all cases, Jesus' way acknowledges the reality of broken people and broken relationships, and recommends a path forward.

It is common to seek revenge or try to get even with those who have hurt us. We expect them to be punished for the wrong they have done. What Jesus proposes here is a system not of retributive justice but of restorative justice. Instead of demanding vengeance, we can engage the other person in order to heal and repair the relationship and community. We are to try multiple times, involving the community as needed, to make amends. We are not to give up on the ones who do harm, but to offer opportunities for dialogue and healing.

Jesus does not abandon sinners or the church filled with conflicted believers. He comes among them as they listen to each other and works to restore their relationships. We practice the work of restoration every week by sharing a sign of peace with one another. In each exchange of peace, Jesus comes among us to offer grace and forgiveness.

See the end of this document for today'

Preservice Music/Welcome

Order for Confession and Forgiveness

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another. *Silence is kept for reflection.*

Faithful God, **have mercy on us.**

We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.

We turn from your loving embrace and go our own ways.

We pass judgment on one another before examining ourselves.

We place our own needs before those of our neighbors.

We keep your gift of salvation to ourselves.

Make us humble, cast away our transgressions, and turn us again to life in you through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

God hears the cries of all who call out in need, and through his death and resurrection, Christ has made us his own. Hear the truth that God proclaims:

Your sins are forgiven in the name of † Jesus Christ.

Led by the Holy Spirit, live in freedom and newness to do God's work in the world. **Amen.**

GATHERING

Gathering Song #530 "Here, O Lord, Your Servants Gather" *A Japanese hymn*

Here, O Lord, your servants gather, hand we link with hand;
looking toward our Savior's cross, joined in love we stand.
As we seek the realm of God, we unite to pray;
Jesus, savior, guide our steps, for you are the way.

Many are the tongues we speak, scattered are the lands,
yet our hearts are one in God, one in love's demands.
E'en in darkness hope appears, calling age and youth;
Jesus, teacher, dwell with us, for your at the Truth.

Nature's secrets open wide, changes never cease.
Where, oh where, can weary souls find the source of peace?
Unto all those sore distressed, torn by endless strife:
Jesus, healer, bring your balm, for you are the life.

Grant, O God, an age renewed, filled with deathless love;
help us as we work and pray, send us from above
truth and courage, faith and pow'r, needed in our strife;
Jesus, master, be our Way, be our Truth, our Life.

Greeting In the name of the Creator, the Sustainer and the Giver of Life. **Amen.**

Prayer of the Day

O Merciful God, enliven and preserve your church with your perpetual mercy.
Without your help, we mortals will fail; remove far from us everything that is harmful,
and lead us toward all that gives life and salvation, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

WORD

The response to "Word of God. Word of Life." is "Thanks be to God."

First Reading: Exodus 12: 1-14

Second Reading:

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling

of the law.

¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Holy Gospel Matthew 18:15-20

Response after the reading is announced: “Glory to you, O Lord.”

¹⁵If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

The good news of Jesus our Lord. “Praise to you, O Christ.”

Sermon Pentecost 13a, September 6, 2020 Matthew 18:15-20

Matthew is the only Gospel in which this admonition appears
which makes me wonder if Mark and Luke consciously omitted this piece
because the issue was too complex and the possible outcomes
or repercussions too unwelcome?

You see, we need to remember that, at the time Matthew is writing this,
that the Jewish Jesus-followers have been expelled
from the synagogues for their conviction
that Jesus was and is the long-promised Messiah.

And, as a result of no longer having a place to worship,
they decide to gather in house-churches of about 10-20 people.
As is quite understandable, conflict or dissension
was a potentially contentious issue and destructive problem
for these small worshipping communities.

Conflict in a large congregation can be dealt with more easily
since people can be somewhat “anonymous” or, at least,
less knowledgeable about what’s going on

and therefore less vested in the eventual outcome
whereas conflict in a small community
is far more complicated and harmful
because everybody knows everything about everybody else
and so what hurts or offends one or two people
can have significant repercussions and cause major divisions.

At the same time, communities, large or small, need boundaries and limits
in order to build a sense of identity and to survive. . .
which raises the question: What sorts of behaviours can transgress
or go beyond the limits and therefore result
in putting someone out of such a community?

In my experience, at least, those attempts to discover what sins
or transgressions deserve exclusion. . .and/or who decides who gets put out--
the whole process often ends up being rather messy and disconcerting
because there are no pat answers or easy actions
that don't result in heartbreak or heartache. . .
and some of us here know that feeling and result all too well.

But, in order to take a closer look at this whole issue,
there couple of things to note about this passage:

First, the New Revised Standard Version translates the beginning of v. 15 as:
“If another member of the church sins against you. . .”
whereas the Greek version of this verse literally reads “If your brother sins against you. . .”
Here it seems that the desire on the part of the translators to be inclusive—
that is, to include both men and women in this statement—this desire to be inclusive
loses the more personal aspect of the phrase “your brother.”

To put it another way: Accepting that the one who has sinned
against you or against another is sister or a brother—
one who is bonded to you in this community and a part of this family:
The issue then becomes how are we to behave toward. . . and what are we to do with. . .
that person with whom we share a faith and a close relationship?

Well, in Matthew's story, Jesus outlines a progression of attempts:

First, if someone. . .or one of us. . .is sinned against or offended by another,
we are not go around telling others:
“Do you know what that jerk did/said to me?”
Instead, we are to go to that jerk. . .
and share our hurt feelings with them and,
if that confrontation and conversion is successful—
that is, if a genuine apology is made and genuine forgiven given,
then peace between the two persons is restored.

But if that one-on-one visit doesn't work,
then the next step is to take one or two witnesses with you on a second visit,
not only for the protection of both parties in making sure
that what is said by each is reported fairly and accurately—
but the presence of witnesses also guarantees
that the one who claims to be offended or “sinned against”
is being reasonable and not simply over-reacting
or being overly-sensitive and therefore judgemental.

And should the sinner—the one who has provoked this problem—
if the sinner realizes the seriousness of the problem or action—
by recognizing that the offended one isn't going to give up
on this issue or give up on the relationship--
if the sinner hears, listens and apologizes,
then forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration happen.

However, if no apology or admission of guilt is forthcoming,
then “tell it to church”—that is, to the whole community--
again, not embarrass or shame the offender, but to confront him or her
with the seriousness of their behaviour and, as a result of that realization,
the person finally apologizes, asks for and is granted forgiveness.

But if there is no admission of guilt or intent to repair the damage caused,
then, according to Matthew, we are to remove, expel or exclude that person
from the community—that is, to “cut them off” or “put them out” of the family. . .
and treat the offender as a “Gentile or a Tax Collector.”

Now, on the face of it, this seems to be a rather clean and clear procedure. . .
except for the fact that Jesus hung around with Gentiles and Tax Collectors;
and that he was accused, rightly, by the religious leaders of sinning
of eating with public sinners. . .and thereby doing
what our mothers or fathers always warned us about,
namely, to be careful about we associate with
because we are or become like the company we keep.

Jesus obviously doesn't take those cautions to heart
and write off any and all outsiders. Instead, he always seeks
to welcome and include such public sinners
as rightful citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

So, once again, we discover, that in seeking to follow Jesus example,
we are, once again, facing an ethical dilemma:
On the one hand, we need to take Matthew's words seriously

that, sometimes there comes a point in the life of a community
when the one who refuses to be reconciled must be “ex-communicated”—
that is, put out of the community—as a way of protecting
the wellbeing of the whole body just as radical surgery
is sometimes performed to remove a cancerous growth. . .
or amputations are carried out to stop the spread of gangrene
which threatens one’s life.

On the other hand, what Jesus doesn’t tell us
is that we are NOT to cut off such people completely, operating as if
we are never going to have anything more to do with them.

Thus, while it is true as Dante put it in his **Inferno**:
“Private actions have public dimensions. . .
for we do not live in isolation”. . .it is also true
that the everyday ethical decisions we make
will always reverberate in the larger circles around us
and will have serious consequences on those nearest and dearest to us.

Therefore, whenever we are dealing with conflict within the church,
love for God, love for the neighbour, love for Christ and love for those in Christ--
love is always to be the guiding principle.

“Owe no one anything except to love one another
for the one who loves has fulfilled the law”
is the way Jesus puts it in today’s Second Reading.

And yet, such love is hardly easy and always costs us something,
particularly when we move beyond the cotton-candy definition of love,
for love requires a willingness to be responsible to others. . .
and to hold others accountable for their actions.

Love means to balance “rights” and “responsibilities”—
meaning that, yes, we have the “right” to disagree with one another
but not the right to be “irresponsible” toward the other in our words and deeds.

After all, we are both respons-ible to and for others. . .
and response-able. . .that is, able to respond
to the needs and concerns of another out of love for the other.

John Claypool tells this moving and compelling story:

A friend of his grew up in a farm family in southern Virginia
where there was very little physical affection
shared between the parents and children.

There was consistent and faithful caring for each other,
but only rarely did they put their affection
into words or loving gestures.

When my friend was about ten, for the first time in her life,
she went to spend the night away from home with her best friend from school.
As the two girls were preparing for bed, her friend's mother came in,
tucked in both children and kissed each of them warmly on the cheek.

This unexpected display of affection caused my friend
to look for the same thing from her own mother.
So, back at home the next night, her mother came into the bedroom
and did what she always did every night—which was to lay out
a clean set of clothes for her daughter for the next day.
And then she left the room.
My friend concluded that her mother loved her less
than her friend's mother loved her daughter.

Twenty years went by, and by this time, my friend had finished
a graduate degree in social work and had been the beneficiary
of a significant amount of personal therapy.

So, on a visit back to the family farm, she emboldened herself
to share the disappointment that she had felt that night long ago.
When she had finished relating that experience,
her mother began to cry very softly and said,
“I wish you had told me what you were feeling in that moment.”

She then went on to explain: “You didn't realize it,
but my mother died when I was very young
and our father did the best he could to hold the family together.
However, he wasn't able to do everything well,
and, as a result, not only did we not get any demonstrative affection,
but we also had to go to school in dirty clothes.”

“I made a resolve then and there,” she said, “that if I ever had children of my own,
the way I would show them my love was to see to it
that they would always have clean clothes to wear to school.”

At that point, Claypool continues, “My friend began to cry. . .
because she had never understood the significance of that ritual
of bringing in the school clothes any more than her mother
had understood or known the hunger of this little girl for physical affection.

The two of them embraced, each realizing that they had missed an opportunity
to meet each other's deepest need because neither of them
had been able to put into words what it was that they most wanted and needed.”

“Private actions have public dimensions. . .for we do not live in isolation.”

I suppose we could summarize this whole admonition in Matthew by saying
that Jesus is not giving us permission to give up on others. . .or to throw people away.
Rather we are to act toward others as God has acted toward us—
never giving up on us. . .always seeking to be reconciled with us. . .
and always calling us to be reconciled with others;

to treat those who sin against us. . .whether enemies or friends—
the way that God has treated and treat us. . .
constantly reminding us and others that we are all the children of God
and inheritors of the kingdom who are called to practice forgiveness.

In a few minutes we will say and pray these words:

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Really? Really? Do we really want God to treat us. . .and forgive us
in the same way we treat others. . .and forgive others?

Not me, for sure. I don’t want God to do to me what I ask:
to forgive me as, or the way, I forgive others.
And neither does God want that. . .or to do that.

Indeed, the intent of the prayer is exactly the opposite:

We pray that God would enable and empower us
to forgive just as we have been forgiven, freely and fully.

As you can see, it is difficult way, a hard road, that Jesus calls us to walk.

But if. . .or, better, when. . .when we want to find new life in. . .
or restore new life to. . .broken, even dead, relationships—
then forgiveness and reconciliation is the path to take
and Jesus is the one to follow.

For just our sin causes a chasm to open up between us and God. . .

and God uses the cross of Christ as the means of bridging that gap
over which God comes to us with the promise of forgiveness--
so, in the same way, when we forgive those who wound us,
forgiveness becomes the bridges that span the separation between us,
enabling us to meet in the middle and, for both of us, to find peace.

Amen. SDG

Song of the Day #603 “God, when Human Bonds are Broken”

God, when human bonds are broken and we lack the love or skill
to restore the hope of healing, give us grace and make us still.

Through that stillness, with your Spirit come into our world of stress,
for the sake of Christ forgiving all the failures we confess.

You in us are bruised and broken; hear us as we seek release from the pain of earlier living; set us free and grant us peace.

Send us, God of new beginnings, humbly hopeful into life. Use us as a means of blessing; make us stronger, give us faith.

Give us faith to be more faithful, give us hope to be more true, give us love to go on learning: God, encourage and renew.

Prayers of Intercession

Drawn together in the compassion of God, we pray for the church, the world, and all those in need. *A brief silence.*

Unite your church, O God. Grant us the gifts of repentance and reconciliation. Bless the cooperative work of churches in this community, especially St. Hilda's Anglican which awaits their new priest, St. John's United and Holy Family Roman Catholic. Strengthen ecumenical partnerships; guide the work of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches. Forgiving One, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Protect your creation, O God. Teach us ways that do not harm what you have entrusted to our care. Renew and enliven places suffering from drought, flood, storms, pollution or the threat of viruses, civil strife, or oppressive and tyrannical rulers. Life-giving One, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Turn nations and leaders from ways that lead to death. Shape new paths toward peace and cooperation, teaching us to recognize one another as neighbors. Guide legislators, civil servants, judges, and police toward laws that protect the well-being of all along with the right to protest for change and for justice. Faithful One, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Tend to all in need of your compassion. Hear the cries of those from whom we are separated or at odds but are still longing for some admission of sorrow at our divisions and yearning for forgiveness and reconciliation. Give community to the lonely and neighbors to the outcast. Shelter all who are vulnerable in body, mind, or spirit (*especially those we name now in our hearts who are ill, lonely, in hospital or care. . .(Pause). . .*) Compassionate One, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Sustain us in our work, O God, and give work to those who need it. Shape societies to ensure fair treatment for all who labour as well as those who have lost their jobs or businesses, hopes or dreams, family members or friends. Help us to love our neighbors in and through our work, our assistance and our care. Sustaining One, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We remember with thanksgiving those who have died in faith, whether as members of this community of faith or as members of our families or as dear and much loved friends—those we bring before you now whose memories and who lives we cherished. . .(Pause). . .

As you equipped them, equip us with your protection and power, until with them we see your salvation. Eternal One, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

All these things and whatever else you see that we need, we entrust to your mercy; through Christ our forgiver, redeemer and lover. **Amen.**

Sharing of the Peace/Offering of ourselves, our time and our possessions

At this time, worshippers are encouraged to continue reading the blessing of the bread and wine which we share in our homes with those in the church building and with all who gather around tables or among friends everywhere in the world.

Offering Prayer

God of abundance, you have poured out a large measure of earthly blessings: our table is richly furnished, our cup overflows, and we live in safety and security. Teach us to set our hearts on you and not these material blessings. Keep us from becoming captivated by prosperity, and grant us the wisdom to use your blessings for the wellbeing of others, and so bring glory to you and healing to humankind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

MEAL

The gifts of bread and wine for each person may be set in place near at hand for their blessing

Prayer of Thanksgiving

God is with us. Therefore, let us pray in gratitude for these gifts of field and vine as well as for all things beneficial and renewing.

You are indeed holy, almighty and merciful God.

You are most holy, and great is the majesty of your glory.

You so loved the world that you gave your only Son,

so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

We give you thanks for his coming into the world

to fulfill for us your holy will and to accomplish all things for our salvation.

In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread,

and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying:

Take and eat; this is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying:

This cup is the new covenant in my blood,

shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me.

For as often as we eat of this bread and drink from this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Remembering, therefore, his salutary command, his life-giving passion and death, his glorious resurrection and ascension, and the promise of his coming again, we give thanks to you, O God Almighty, not as we ought but as we are able;

we ask you mercifully to accept our praise and thanksgiving and with your Word and Holy Spirit to bless us, your servants, and these your own gifts of bread and wine, so that we and all who share in the body and blood of Christ may be filled with heavenly blessing and grace, and, receiving the forgiveness of sin, may be formed to live as your holy people and be given our inheritance with all your saints.

To you, O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all honour and glory in your holy church, now and forever. **Amen,**

Let us pray the prayer Jesus taught us, remembering his mercy and grace toward us

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Invitation Eat and drink the food that gives life.
A musical reflection during the meal

SENDING

Prayer after the Meal

Gracious God, in this meal you have drawn us to your heart and nourished us at your table with food and drink, the living presence of the living Christ. Now send us forth to be your people in the world, and to proclaim this truth this day and evermore, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Brother. Amen.

Benediction

May God bless us and keep us. May God's face shine upon us and be gracious to us. May God always look upon us with favour (+) and grant us peace. Amen.

Sending Song #867 "In Thee is Gladness"

In thee is gladness amid all sadness, Jesus, sunshine of my heart.
By thee are given the gifts of heaven, thou the true redeemer art.
Our souls thou wakest; our bonds thou breakest.
Who trusts thee surely has built securely and stands forever: Alleluia!

Our hearts are pining to see thy shining, dying or living,
to thee are cleaving; naught can us sever: Alleluia!

Jesus is ours! We fear no powers, not of earth nor sin, nor death.
He sees and blesses in worst distresses, he can change them with a breath.
Wherefore the story tell of his glory with heart and voices;
all heav'n rejoices in him forever; Alleluia!
We shout for gladness, triumph o'er sadness, love him and praise him
and still shall raise him glad hymns forever. Alleluia!

Dismissal

Go in peace to be at peace with all. Thanks be to God.

Postlude

