

What Love Requires

September 10, 2023

Matthew 18:15-20

Prayer: God of ancient story and present moment may the words I offer in reflection, be acceptable to you and echo your wisdom in our time. Amen

Such sad news coming out of Morocco this morning. So many lost lives. We will hold the people of Morocco in our prayers this morning and throughout the coming weeks. So many places in our world rocked by natural disasters. Idalia swept through Florida last week and images of the aftermath were posted to various news feeds. Several images touched my heart; one was of a black police officer carrying an elderly white woman through the water to safety and another was of a Hispanic firefighter rescuing a Korean family from their flooded home. People of every race and language, helping neighbours of every race and language.

There were similar images of neighbour helping neighbour in Hawaii after the devastating fires there. And in our own country, there were images of all ages, races and languages of people helping those of every age, race and language in Northern Fire evacuation centres. All of these images touched my heart. What happens in the aftermath of a disaster is remarkable.

For me these are images of hope. For a moment, at least, we did not focus on arguments about school policies, or listen to the shouts of people from the extreme opposites of the political landscape. For a moment, people were just being people, humans being human. Don't get me wrong – earthquakes, hurricanes and fires don't give us an excuse to not confront important issues. We have many things to deal with. But in the aftermath of these natural disasters, the things that divide us seem to be put into proper perspective.

In the hours and days after a disaster, people of every race, language and way of life help their neighbors of every race language and way of life. Everyone faces a common challenge, and everyone works toward a common goal – making sure that the other, human beings, around them are safe and taken care of. It seems in moments like this, we acknowledge, something we should never forget: **that we are all part of the human family**, and every human being has dignity and value.

At the end of today's Gospel, Jesus reminds us that wherever human beings are, he is there, in our midst. He is there, wherever two or three people are gathered in his name, because he is present in every human being. We seem to remember that – especially in moments of need.

Neighbors just help neighbors. In Saskatchewan there are hundreds of stories about farmers helping farmers – of combines coming into a neighbour's field to help with harvest because a fellow farmer is sick or injured. Tele – miracle is another visible sign that we in Saskatchewan get what it means to be there for our neighbour – raising crazy amounts of money for kids and families that need support. It is in our nature to help. When we help it is like saying – to everyone, you are my brother, you are my sister – you are my sibling. The Christ who lives in me - is the Christ who lives in you. And if I have any means to help, I must help. **This is what love requires**. I see Christ in you, and so I must treat you with dignity.

But there is **more** to today's Gospel than an encouragement to respect and love others in the midst of crisis and disaster. In some ways respecting and loving hurricane victims a thousand miles away or others struggling down the road feels easy. We make a donation – we say a prayer – we go on with our day. But in today's Gospel, Jesus asks – actually, he demands – that we not limit our respect and love to people a thousand miles away. Jesus asks, even demands that we respect and love the people right in front of us. Even the people with whom we disagree. Even the ones who may have done something that has hurt us or angered us. Now **I'm not** talking about relationships severed due to acts of violence or abuse here - that is a totally different matter. I'm talking about relationships we live in day to day. This is where it gets hard! Jesus says:

If your sister or brother sins against you; if they've done something that has hurt you, confused you, harmed you... here is how a Christian handles it...

If your neighbor sins against you - has said or done something which leaves you shaking your head - here is how a Christian responds...

Go and talk with them.

When something has happened between you and someone else, when something difficult has arisen, go and talk with them.

Do not talk **about** them to everyone else. Talk **to** them.

I think this is one of Jesus' most challenging teachings for us in our time. Systems of communication are so different from what they use to be. Perhaps it is just me, but our relationships seem much more disposable. We swipe right or left; we send a text, or email – we don't have to be in the same space if we don't want to.

When someone hurts me or does something with which I disagree, Jesus demands that I go and speak with them. It's easier somehow to love a hurricane victim 1000 miles away, but that person across the table is another matter. Jesus calls me to love the person, near to me who just made a decision that I disagree with. What am I to do when the person next to me says or does something that I don't approve of? Or it hurts me? The Gospel asks that the Christ in me must honor the Christ in them. The Jesus who loves that other person wants me to love that other person. And that love is expressed in the concrete way that I respect their dignity as a child of God.

So the instructions of Jesus are clear. If someone sins against you, hurts you or does something that causes you pain: + go and speak with them about it, - And in the gospel lesson Jesus lays out a process so we get how important it is to try and fix things.

First go alone, one on one. + and if that does not work, try again! + then take someone with you to talk together + then ask for the help of the church + and only after all of that has failed, then you can (swipe left) - treat them like a "Gentile or tax collector." (**But before** you assume that this means that you can dismiss them or 'cancel' them, or post an angry message about them on Facebook, remember: this is Matthew's Gospel. And what job did Matthew have? He was a tax collector? And how did Jesus treat this tax collector? He made him an Apostle, and loved him!)

These instructions from Jesus are clear and they sound so simple. But the behavior described in this Gospel passage runs counter to what we are often told to do by the culture we live in. Here's an example: + I get an email from someone, and I am upset by it. So instead of calling the person and asking to speak directly to them about it, I forward that email to 7 friends, with a comment, "Can you believe she did this?" + OR - a member of your family says or does something that hurts you in some way. Instead of speaking with them, you go to social media and post angry words for all to see. + OR - your boss makes a decision with which you disagree IN fact, you think it's a hurtful decision. Instead of going to speak with your boss, you spend the next month tearing them down at coffee break. + OR - your former spouse hurts you deeply. Instead of speaking with them about it, you take every opportunity to speak ill of them in front of your children. + OR -+ your best friend – says something at a dinner party that gets you mad. So you proceed to give them the cold shoulder for several months and exclude them from further gatherings.

What does Jesus say? "Go and talk with them." Jesus does not provide any wiggle room here. I wish he did, because I know that this is not an easy teaching, and I know that I do not carry it out very well. It is easier to hide behind self righteous anger than risk uncomfortable conversations. It's hard to work together, respect each other, speak together, when the person you're struggling with has a face and a name and is right in front of you. Loving neighbours from a distance is easy. Loving a neighbour who has hurt you is much harder. Loving those with whom we disagree is a hard Gospel task. I suspect that Jesus knew that his disciples would hear these words and wonder – is this really possible? Can we really do what he's asking? Can we step into the hard conversations and do the work of building right relationships, living forgiveness, living with humility? Can we tend to our most intimate relationships relying on our own strength, our own wisdom, our own ways?

Maybe this is why Jesus includes this thoroughly encouraging sentence in the midst of his challenging teaching.

Jesus says - If two of you agree on earth about anything for which you are to pray, it shall be granted to them.

Jesus never asks us to do anything alone or in isolation. He reminds us that the kind of healing, honest conversations he's describing will only be possible if we root those conversations in our relationship with him.

I struggle to do what Jesus asks in today's context. But he's not asking me to do it by myself. He's reminding me that faith can do it in me, and through me.

Jesus shows us the way. He teaches us how. And in his word, he gives us the grace and strength we need, to begin.

Thanks be to God.
Amen

Rev. Debra Berg