

Proper 18 Year A
Sept. 10, 2017
St. James

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This morning's gospel lesson
certainly is different from what we normally hear, isn't it?
So many gospel readings
are filled with references to lilies of the field,
and lost sheep,
and miracles, walking on water,
or casting out demons
or transfiguration or resurrection.

But not this morning's reading.

No sir.

While other gospel stories may deal with the sublime,
this is pretty mundane stuff.

This morning we get a step-by-step guide to conflict
resolution.

It's almost like an employee handbook.

Now granted, I think it's pretty good advice.

If you have a dispute with someone,

Or if you feel someone is doing something they ought not be,

Then you go and confront that person, face to face.

You don't gossip behind that person's back.

You don't engage in passive-aggressive behavior.

You don't send mixed signals.

No, you go to that person and tell them straight out
that you find their behavior lacking.

You hold them accountable for their behavior.

Now for someone like me,
Who is by my very nature a conflict avoider,
That can be a very hard thing to do.
It's easier to look away,
To pretend I don't see what's happening.
To mind my own business.

But according to Jesus,
That's NOT what I'm supposed to do.
When I see someone doing wrong,
I need to call them on it.
To speak the truth to them—
Lovingly, to be sure,
But to speak up,
And not ignore a problem in hopes it will just go away.

And if that doesn't do the trick,
then I'm to get two or three friends,
And together we go and try again.
We don't give up.
Some people might call this "holy nagging,"
And Jesus commends it.

And if the person still won't mend his ways,
then we're to get the whole community
to hold that person accountable.
We do whatever we can
to bring this person back into the fold,
Back into the household of faith.

But I think the most important point in this passage
- And the one that's most misunderstood -
is what Jesus says should happen
to the person who refuses to listen
even to the whole community.

“If the offender refuses to listen even to the church,
let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector.”

Now, a lot of people take that to mean
that we should exclude that person.
Shun them. Avoid them. Excommunicate them.

Let me assure you, straight up:
This text is not about how to throw someone OUT of our
community.
This is about how to LOVE somebody back INTO our
community.

Because answer me this:
How did Jesus himself treat tax collectors and Gentiles?

Matthew, in whose gospel we find these words, was a what?
Anybody know?
Matthew was a tax collector.
He was a tax collector Jesus invited into his inner circle.
And what about Zaccheus,
the “wee little man in the sycamore tree?”
Tax collector.
Jesus went and had dinner with him.

And what about Gentiles?
How did Jesus treat them?

There's the Woman at the well.
The conversation Jesus has with her
is the longest conversation he has with ANYBODY
that's recorded in scripture.

There's the Roman centurion with a dying daughter.
The Canaanite woman who wanted HER daughter healed.
Jesus helped them both.

If you read through the gospels,
you'll see example after example
where Jesus reached out to Gentiles.
That doesn't sound like shunning and excommunicating to
me.

Jesus is not advising us to go around
kicking people OUT of our community,
out of our lives.

I think that what Jesus really meant is this:
He knew that there ARE people who will drive us crazy.
There ARE people we'll never see eye to eye with.
There ARE people with whom it is hard to reconcile.
And those are people in need of serious love.

This text is about learning to love people,
even when they don't particularly want to be loved.
Do you know anybody like that?
It's about reaching out to people,
even if they push us away.

It's about loving others enough
to talk to them about their behavior
and to offer them help in changing it.
And it's about refusing to give up on anybody,
anybody at all.

It's about the willingness to go that extra mile
to find a lost sheep.
It's about a willingness to forgive and forgive and forgive,
until the sinner is redeemed.

In his letter to the Romans
the apostle Paul views love as the key
to our relationships with our neighbors.
Since we are loved by God,
we are commanded to love our neighbor.
This is the way to follow Christ.

And love is more than just a warm, fuzzy emotion.
Love is action.
Love disregards labels, or political affiliations,
or socioeconomic status or citizenship status.
Love responds to another person's hurt,
to another person's need.
Love acts.

One thing that has helped to unite our nation
during the long, awful, watery and windy chaos
of Hurricane Harvey, and now Hurricane Irma,
has been the outpouring of aid for those in need.
We want to do more than just watch it rain.
We want to do something tangible to help.

Isn't it nice to be doing something to help our neighbor,
without anybody first asking
whether those receiving our help got here legally?
Or who they're likely to vote for?
Or whether they're lesbian or gay or transgendered?
Or whether they have insurance?

Isn't it nice that, right now,
we don't care about any of those things?
We just want to help them.
As Paul says,
now is not the time for quarrelling and jealousy.
Now is not the time to concern ourselves
with others' appearances or judgment.
No, now is not the time for that.
Now is the time simply to love.

It's been nearly 2,000 years since Paul wrote those words,
and we're still waiting for the full consummation
of God's reign on earth.
But his words are no less urgent.
We have an obligation to God, to our neighbors and to
ourselves.
This obligation is to love as God has loved us.

Our obligation is to treat other people
the way Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors,
as people to be loved,
and brought into the Kingdom of God.

Amen.