

September 7, 2008

17th Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 18a (Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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COMMUNITY MINISTRY

On a day when we are celebrating the extent and variety of ministries in and of this community of faith, we are presented with scriptures about behavior. Paul continues his section of ethical teaching on what love looks like in the community:

“Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law”

And Matthew addresses the reality of post baptismal sin and how the church can handle it:

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone...”

They are both keen for us to understand that sin is not a private matter and that behavior that we might consider private is of concern to the whole community.

The foundation for all Christian standards of behavior or Christian ethics is often said to be the resurrection of Jesus and its consequence. That is certainly Paul's point of view and what we read here is by way of a conclusion or consequence for what has gone before. Some theologians have begun to see the resurrection as a means of recovering the vision of Israel as a community in which our human tendency to create victims is overcome. Much of what we do in life comes about through imitation or comparison. When we want to be like others or be different from them we are in some sense distinguishing ourselves and our identity is shaped in reaction to those others. This leads us to live in ways tribal and sectarian. I watched some of the political conventions for the first time in my life and saw on display a kind of tribal ritual where the commentators talked of speakers 'energizing their party base'. The same sense of emotional bonding that seems to be inconsequential in support of a football team can and does in many instances become the basis for creating victims. If we feel a kind of warm sense of community by being Episcopalians we are only a very small step from being Episcopalians over against those other people: fundamentalists or Muslims or Roman Catholics or whatever. The unity is created at the expense of an exclusion. (When I say a prayer at our pre service meeting of many of those involved in the leadership of our worship I usually conclude by saying "let's go to church. Yay Episcopalians." My very first boss used to say that and I believe his intention was to be deliberately ironic about our similarity to a pre-game huddle, and remind us that what we are doing is not a game at all.)

Our friend, Holy Week preacher of a few years ago and theologian James Alison is clear that the resurrection is God's graceful project of bringing into being a new community in which a new humanity can live free.¹ He sees the formation in the wilderness of a group of escaped slaves into a nation as one in which there are no victims

¹ This section of the sermon is heavily dependent on James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (SPCK, 1993) p.44 ff

and Israel's identity is not one nation over against many others. "You shall have no other Gods but me" saith the Lord. Alison reminds us that those former slaves were to create a community in which no one need be victimized and those most susceptible, -the widows and orphans, the poor, the immigrants, foreigners and strangers—were particularly protected under the law that expressed the identity of his people as those who had once been victimized and are now free by the grace of God.

Israel is established as a nation whose only referent is God and God's saving grace that brought the people out of their bondage in Egypt. And so with the new humanity in the resurrection: our only referent is God's grace on which we depend for life. All of our ethics and behavior should therefore be directed toward the story we tell around the Lord's Table and its consequences. This is even and perhaps especially true for those who would make their claim in the world by wearing the mantle of victim and so claim a kind of moral superiority over against those who would victimize. If this victim seizes power then the same cycle continues for ever. It has been suggested that one of the things that makes the peace process in the Middle East so intractable is that every party is wedded to the idea that they are the victims in the situation.

I find it deliciously ironic that after everything else has been tried for those times when 'another member of the church sins against you' is that when such a person who will not listen to you, to friends or to the whole community, then you are to "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." In other words, the people you exclude from the church must be treated as the very ones for whom Jesus came and it is, once again it is the Church, the new Israel, who is under judgment for failing to be the new creation of grace that we are created to be.

Traditionalists, of course, say that everyone is welcome and that everyone is loved, but that behavior must conform to the understandings of the tradition as interpreted by the leaders of the day and that in face, such conformity, is a sign of the transforming grace of God. This argument might have merit if only it did not sound so much like saying 'strict observance of the law is the way to be faithful' to which we hear Jesus say in any number of ways, 'but that is a cover for your mechanisms of exclusion and violence'.

We say that we want all of our ministries -- from the life transforming work of the Covenant Community (whose renewed facilities are open for us today) to the caring gift of the Guild of the Good Shepherd who selflessly offer hospitality to those who mourn at the time of funerals here, --all of them, we say, are 'relationship based'. Right relationships are those in which we make choices to put our friendships first so that everyone may participate in the freedom we are promised in this new way of living, this new community, this new Israel called the Church, recognizing that even our best intentions and most important defining decisions come under the judgment of the one who approaches us as the victim of all our sin.

The ministries we celebrate are, at their best, ones in which we find it true that in service we are freed and in giving we receive. The ministries we celebrate today are those

in which real and right relationship, --glimpses of real human connection through all the barriers that we construct and which define us in so many ways—become possible.

As I draw to a close, let me leave you with a true story that embodies so much of what I have been saying here. A friend of mine and former parishioner here who has since moved away became involved in our ministries of friendship with refugees. (And incidentally, in that regard, I am told that we have been led to expect that the next family we sponsor will be from Iraq, victims of Saddam Hussein and now in fear because of their support for us.) My friend was connected with a family who were moving into a new apartment, and he, together with some of you, spent a Saturday collecting donated furniture from various places and delivering it to their new home. He came back so excited by the joy in his refugee friends as their new home took shape and he said to me, “We really should consider setting up a warehouse and collecting furniture and making it available to every refugee in Atlanta. I bet we could do it with all the resources and connections that we have.” And I answered him by saying that he had a wonderful idea and a wonderful vision, but that it wasn’t the ministry to which we are committed. I suggested that the wonderful experience he had enjoyed was because he had connected in friendship with these people who were forging a new life as he was in so many ways. I suggested that it was not the furniture that mattered as much as the friendship, and it was that real friendship across all the stories of victimization and exclusion and separation and degradation that was the response to the story we hear every week around this table: the story of one who in friendship died for our sin and opened the possibility of a better way not only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but even to those accounted Gentiles and tax collectors, even to you and me.

Let us, in a short time of silence for prayer, respond to the Gospel:
“Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law”
Let us pray...