

The 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
September 10, 2017  
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Exodus 12:1-14  
Psalm 149  
Romans 13:8-14  
Matthew 18:15-20

“This would be a nice place to live if it weren’t for all the tourists!”

That’s a comment a co-worker once shared with my mother a long, long time ago. The place in question was Frankenmuth, Michigan. What you really need to know about Frankenmuth is that it’s a tourist community, admittedly a bit too contrived for my tastes. There’s Bronner’s, the world largest year-round Christmas store, Zehnder’s and the Bavarian Inn, competing restaurants on opposite sides of Main Street, serving the same world-famous chicken dinners, and everything in town built to remind us all of a Bavarian village that never really existed – unbelievably neat and tidy. “This would be a nice place ... if it weren’t for all the tourists.”

My mother’s co-worker intended it as a joke, but my mother wasn’t amused. “All these tourists,” she reminded her, “were the reason they had a job there.”

I’ve lived in a couple of tourist towns since: first in Ashland, home of the Shakespeare Festival, for nine years before coming here; and now in Bend for the past three years now. And in both places, I know how it is that we – at least some of us – begin to resent the tourists who take over: they take up all our parking spots and crowd our restaurants; they pack the art galleries on “First Fridays.” So I get how we look forward to when we’ll get our town back. But my mom was right. We only get a place like this, with all the amenities we enjoy all year round, because of those who crowd the town, so inconveniently, through some of the seasons of the year.

Churches can be a bit like that, too. We long to belong. We want to be part of a community, to know there’s a place where we can go and know we’ll be greeted warmly every time we come in through the doors – like every time “Norm” came through the doors in that cozy bar in Boston made popular by the TV show *Cheers*, and they all greeted him, “Hey, Norm!”

The thing is, though ... churches are made up of people. There’s the rub. As my mother’s old co-worker might have said, “Churches would be a pretty good place ... if it weren’t for the people.” But as one observer has said, “people -- not you and me, of course, but most people -- can be difficult, challenging, selfish, and unreliable.”

It’s pretty clear to me that Jesus says what he says in this morning’s gospel because he saw both the potential for good and the potential for problems. Our longing for a sense of relatedness and community is complicated by the realities of people who “can be difficult, challenging, selfish, and unreliable.” I think Jesus is offering us a new way of responding to such people.

But take a care. And take a moment to note what Jesus’ advice really is. And what it isn’t.

First, what it isn't. The three-step process Jesus lays out – step one, talk to the offender alone; step two, follow up with one or two others; step three, take the matter before the whole church – isn't a quick fix for whatever ails you. This isn't a mechanical solution to an interpersonal problem. Jesus says as much, of course. The most oft-repeated word in those three steps is that little word "if" – suggesting it may work; it may fail. If it works, great; if it doesn't, try something else.

And, as a strategy for managing the inevitable conflicts that arise in any relationship, Jesus' advice is "okay" but it's not really a gift from heaven offering the definitive guild to conflict management and community making. Mind you, there's much good in what Jesus is saying. I think, in particular, about that first step, because when we have been hurt, it's pretty normal to talk to close friends who will commiserate with us and agree with us and take our side with us – none of which fixes a broken relationship. Jesus would have us break the cycle, in essence saying, "work it out between the two of you" (*Message*). So far as that goes, it's good advice, but it's not really earth-shattering or a cure-all for everything that's wrong in the world: useful, sure; too often unheeded, absolutely; but, for all that, it's still perhaps obvious stuff.

And it's not a foolproof plan. Frankly, it's just wide open to manipulation. I can easily imagine someone following the steps just to say they've followed the process but never intending anything good or wholesome to come of it: first, you attack the other, justifying yourself as only pointing out their fault; then, you line up allies who will help you gang up on the other; and then, finally, you can write them off. And the best part is, you make them the problem and you yourself never have to change. I've been on the receiving end of that kind of behavior and I can tell you: it's not fun; it's not edifying; and it's not helpful.

To see what Jesus really is getting at, I think we need to hear what he was talking about before. His disciples had asked him about being "great" in the eyes of God, and Jesus tells them that kind of "greatness" means welcoming and taking care of one another – especially the children, the vulnerable, and those he calls "the little ones." And he'll go on, as we'll hear here next week, to talk about forgiving those who offend not just seven times, but seventy times seven. In the context of what's come before and what follows, this morning's word to us is that when someone offends you, don't shut them out, and don't try to get even. No, you have a problem, so fix it. Do whatever you can to mend the break in the relationship. Do more than your share.

And that point comes clear, I think, in that last step of the three-part process. Jesus isn't telling us how to go through the motions and "check off the boxes," so we can be content, when we're done, that we've done all we could do. Admittedly, Jesus says in the end, "... let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." And that may sound like excommunication, like an acknowledgement that while some may accept our reproof, others won't and they can be dismissed. But that's actually the moment, I think, when Jesus drives the point all the way home. Consider, after all, the times Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners. Recall the Canaanite woman. Jesus praised her great faith precisely because she didn't accept being treated like a dog and left out in the cold. Gentiles and tax collectors, indeed!

In the end, I don't think Jesus is telling us how to get other people to change; he's calling on each of us to change the way we respond to those who bother us or offend us. The one who offends me presents me with my next opportunity to love.

The late psychiatrist and writer Scott Peck told a story once as the prologue to one of his books. It's a story about a monastery that had fallen on hard times. Once upon a time, it had thrived. But over the years, it had declined to the point where there were just five monks left, each of them over 70 years of age. This is his story:

On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut. He would come there, from time to time, to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared, the word passed from monk to monk: "The rabbi walks in the woods."

It occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."

So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. At the end of that day, the rabbi paused and said, "I'm sorry, I have no advice." But then he said one thing more, "The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around to ask, "Well, what did the rabbi say?"

"He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving – it was something cryptic - was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks that followed, the old monks pondered the significance of the rabbi's words and wondered whether there was any possible significance to them.

The Messiah is one of us? Could he have meant one of us monks here? If so, which monk?

He probably would mean the abbot. He's been our leader for a generation.

On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.

Certainly he could not mean Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, though he is a thorn in our sides, he's virtually always right.

But surely not Brother Phillip. He's so passive. But then, almost mysteriously, almost magically, he has a gift for somehow being there when you need him.

Of course, the old rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. Yet supposing he did??

And as the old monks contemplated the meaning, they began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off-off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

And so it came to be that when visitors came to the monastery – as they still did from time to time – they found themselves deeply moved by these monks. They sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery – to picnic and to play ... and to pray.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk with the monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So it came to be that, thanks to the rabbi's gift, the monastery had become a thriving order once more, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.<sup>i</sup>

Community matters. And people are not the problem. No, they're the opportunity. And people – more specifically, YOU – are the solution.

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<sup>i</sup> "The Rabbi's Gift," as told by M. Scott Peck in *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1987), though I've adapted it a bit from the original.

In telling the story, I left it as Scott Peck tells it, a story of men in a monastery. I did wonder if it would be different if I told it as a story of women in a convent or perhaps one of the old mixed Celtic monasteries of men and women (as in Kildare or Whitby). For better and worse, I left it as it was first told, but invite those reading this to wonder if it would be the same told differently.