

The 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
September 6, 2020  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Ezekiel 33:7-11  
Psalm 119:33-40  
Romans 13:8-14  
Matthew 18:15-20

*Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.*

St. Paul gets a bad rap – not always deserved. Some of what people say they don't like aren't really Paul's words, but someone writing in his name. Some of what people say they don't like suffers from translation across languages and cultures and time and space.

And yet for all that, even people who say they don't like Paul love what Paul had to say about love. I think, especially, of the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Corinthians (read at many, many weddings), from the opening verse of that chapter:

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

Yes, from the opening verse of the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Corinthians to the last:

*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

And Paul speaks eloquently of love in this morning's reading from Romans:

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*

And goes on to say that the commandments of God "are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

This word about love is the interpretive key for us this morning. Every morning, I suppose.

Of course, the idea wasn't original to Paul. Jesus himself said as much. We recall these words of Jesus every time we celebrate a Rite I service over at Trinity:

*Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*

*Book of Common Prayer, p. 324 (cf. Matthew 22:37-40)*

Now I trust that none of this is news for you. But I remind you of these words, all the same, because they are so fundamental to us. We must remember them – repeat them as needed – before we go outside into public ... or go online.

And this word about love is the interpretive key, particularly, for us to remember as we hear all of Jesus' words in this morning's gospel. For apart from love, all that we're left with – at best – is a set of instructions for dealing with conflict (and conflictual people) in the church:

- Someone offends you, call their attention to what they did.
- If that doesn't work, call on others to sit down with the two of you.
- If that fails, cut the offender off and kick them out.

Apart from love, I worry how easy it is to hear these words as a legalistic technique allowing for a church community to stop caring for others. A church can go through the motions, and feel okay about the loss of a relationship.

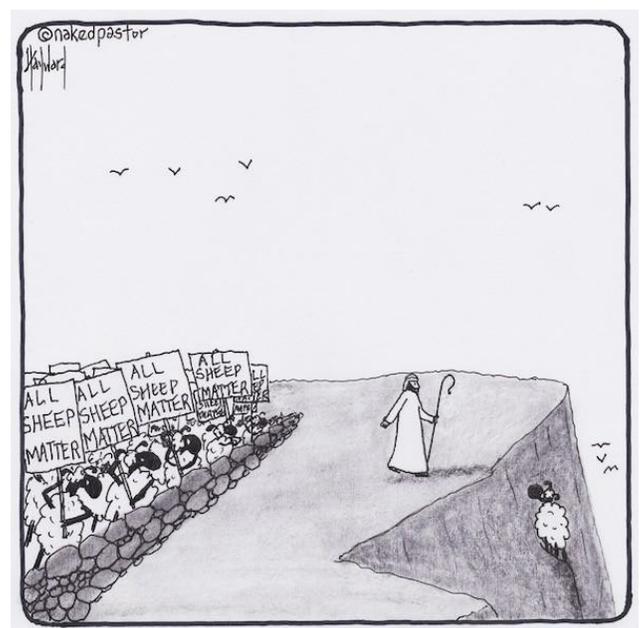
And at their worst – and apart from love – these instructions can do harm. They seem to allow one person to use an offense as an excuse to become offensive, then tell their friends and ask them take sides. And then, when the damage is done, justify it all as doing nothing less than Jesus said.

But Jesus expects so much more of us. He expects us to love.

And he never gave us permission to care for those we like and not to care for others. That ought to be clear from everything Jesus ever had to say about love. And it's pointedly clear from what Jesus had to say in the verses just before where we picked up this morning. (Read Matthew 18:1-14.)

Jesus had been teaching about the need to care for all God's children. He extolled the virtue of welcoming children. He warned that anyone who failed to care for those he referred to as "little ones" would be better off "drowned in the depth of the sea." And then Jesus went on to tell a story about shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go off to find the one who has gone astray.

Perhaps you've seen the cartoon that's been making the rounds (again) on social media these past couple of months since the killing of George Floyd. This cartoon shows a bunch of sheep – presumably 99 of them – holding up signs saying "ALL SHEEP MATTER." But the shepherd turns away from them, leaving them safe behind a stone wall, and walks to the exposed edge of a cliff to rescue the one sheep who is in peril. The point, of course, is not that the 99 sheep don't matter; it's that Jesus shows care for those who most need his care. Sharing that cartoon now is a call for all of us to care about those lives that seem not to matter as much as others.



And then, just one verse before where we pick up this morning, Jesus sums up all that he'd been saying in the first 13 verses of chapter 18 in the 14<sup>th</sup> verse, saying that it is God's will that not "one of these little ones should be lost."

[Oh, and next Sunday, by the way, we'll pick up with Peter trying to limit his responsibility for others. He'll ask Jesus how many times he must forgive. And Jesus will say, as many times as it takes to love the other back into right relationship. (But that's next week's sermon.)]

The point is that this is the context of what Jesus is talking about. Love is the interpretive key. Here as always.

Love is what binds the community together: love for the most vulnerable who need it most; love for those who strain the bonds of love; love for those most hard to forgive.<sup>i</sup>

Our former Presiding Bishop (and friend) Katharine Jefferts Schori, in a sermon she preached back in 2014, put it this way:

The gospel this morning is trying to teach [us to love]. Jesus says, start by dealing directly with the offender. Meet him as the image of God, rather than complaining to others or spreading gossip about what she's done. Go directly and see if you can find a way to **heal what's been broken** ...

Jesus goes on to say that if you don't get anywhere, take a couple of others with you and try again. Don't give up simply because the first attempt has failed ... Our task is **to love this person or group back into relationship**, not condemn people to outer darkness ...

If you still don't get anywhere, tell the church community – take this matter to a group of loving people for discernment ... If even that doesn't work, [Jesus] says, "let that person be as a Gentile or a tax collector."<sup>ii</sup>

She goes on to emphasize, of course, that Jesus never abandoned Gentiles and tax collectors. He went to dinner with Gentiles and tax collectors. He went the extra mile for them. He called them for join his movement of love.

I love what she has to say about all this because she makes it clear that the point was never about trying to fix or punish another person; it was always about trying to "heal what's been broken," and "to love [another person] back into relationship." It was never about justifying our hard-heartedness; it was always about seeking ways to love one another as we have been loved.

Of course, this is all much more complicated these days. So take special care when going online. Or when opening up your email. Technology has provided us with new ways to triangulate, new ways to stir up conflict without addressing one another directly.

Jesus invites a different way, a countercultural alternative. Love is the interpretive key. Always.

As I said early on this morning, we need to remember this fundamental fact – and repeat it to ourselves as needed – before we go outside ... or go online on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram or TikTok. For Jesus invites us to love each other enough not to speak *about* others and not merely to speak *to* or *at* them, but to speak in love *with* one another.

That's my concern this morning, that we take care with one another rather than hear in this morning's gospel any hint that Jesus ever gives us permission to do anything that demeans another or diminishes our sense of community (and the common good).

I suppose I ought to stop there. (That's certainly enough for us to chew on.) But there is something else – having to do with the importance of community – that I want us to take seriously.

Way back in March, when we first closed our church doors, I told you that I thought “social-distancing” was the wrong term. I preferred “physical-distancing,” because I felt then – and still feel now – that we need to continue to find ways to stay socially-connected with one another.

As an act of caring for others, we need to take precautions: we need to wash our hands; we need to wear masks in public; and we need to maintain safe distances from one another.

We do these things for one another. And we do them for ourselves. And even as we do those things, we need to build up a sense of community and care for one another (however we can). And not just for their sake, but for our own, as well.

A few weeks back, I caught part of an interview with Dr. Vivek Murthy, once the Surgeon General. Long before COVID-19 changed so much about how we interact with one another, he was on a mission to get us to think of loneliness as a public health issue. He talked about other associated medical risks: heart disease, premature death, dementia, depression, anxiety and sleep disturbances. And he went on to talk about positive health benefits of social connection.

He was concerned about loneliness before COVID-19. Now he worries that our normal ways of interacting have been so disrupted, that a “social recession” will follow. He worries that loneliness and disconnection will settle in for years to come. And so he offers a few strategies to overcome loneliness in these challenging times (especially in these challenging times):

- Make it a point to spend at least 15 minutes a day with people you care about ... It could be anything from picking up the phone to have a conversation or writing a letter to a loved one saying you're thinking of them.
- And when you get quality time with others, make the moments count ...  
Humans think they can multitask when listening to a friend and checking their phone, but science proves that's not the case ...

- Search for ways to serve your community ... because many are in need during these difficult times. It can be as simple as checking in on a neighbor or virtually babysitting for a friend's child. <sup>iii</sup>

And Dr. Murthy ended up expressing a hope: if we take our care now, even in the midst of a pandemic, we can enhance our sense of community now AND for the future. He says we can “build a people-centered world that is powered by love.”

His perspective is a secular one, but his hope that we might “build a people-centered world that is powered by love” sounds like a gospel hope. Or as St. Paul put it at the start this morning:

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments ... are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”*

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<sup>i</sup> And then there's this too:



<sup>ii</sup> Katharine Jefferts Schori @ <https://episcopalchurch.org/posts/jeffertsschori/sermon-st-johns> (emphasis added).

<sup>iii</sup> “How To Mitigate Loneliness And Its Consequences,” by Tonya Mosley and Serena McMahon, on *Here & Now* (August 20, 2020) @ <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/08/20/loneliness-public-health-coronavirus> -- accessed September 2, 2020.