

Sermon on Matthew 18:15-20
14th Sunday after Pentecost, September 6, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

We human beings are social animals. We seek being together with other human beings – we desire community. The irony is that even when we find community, we find it hard to live together in it! We seek love, and the joy we find in it, but we often hurt the persons we love the most! Probably because we misplace our priorities, confusing love for others with our desire to satisfy ourselves, with what others can give to us, and if they don't, to just take it. Plus we don't always listen very well, so we end up in conflict with others in our families, in our community or in the church. It happens all the time, which is why conflict is so common. Jesus spoke about it today in the gospel as a matter for the church, when we don't listen to each other – and the remedy is to listen!

The gospel teaches us that it is love that holds us all together in the beloved community – God's love for us, our love for God, and for our neighbor – even for our enemies! As Jesus said, the Law and the Prophets teach us that the greatest of all commandments is this: *“To love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.”* And in his letter to the Romans, our second lesson today, the Apostle Paul wrote, *“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”*

So we have this ideal, given to us by God, to love God and neighbor, and so to live in community. But we know how often you and I fall short. This is why the first thing we do in corporate worship is to confess our sins against God and one another. Today we began worship by saying out loud to each other: *“We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We turn from your loving embrace and go our own ways. We pass judgment on one another before examining ourselves. We place our own needs before those of our neighbors.”* We could also easily add the truth about ourselves: that we too seldom really listen to our neighbor, to hear of their pain or care about their needs. For this we ask God for forgiveness and mercy. We ask for the faith and strength to follow Jesus' example, and do better. We should also ask God for the courage to admit our failings to our neighbor or beloved friends against whom we have sinned, and ask for their forgiveness. Why? So that our relationships can be mended, we can all find healing, and community can be restored, for Jesus' sake. That's the goal!

But we know all the forces that work against community and restoring broken relationships in our world today. We have a history of racism, violence and discrimination in this country, which has resulted in the separation of all of us into ethnic, racial and economic groups, with the consequence that many suffer. We are living this summer in the conflict and despair that has come from the unjust treatment of black men, women and children by police in our society. But we are divided over what to do about the resulting unrest, between transformation change or “holding on” with “law and order”. When needed training about racism and white privilege is proposed, our government rejects it as “un-American”. But when we can’t talk about divisive subjects, reconciliation becomes impossible.

We see the consequence of unhealthy communication over controversial issues on social media. It is far too common on Facebook to see a post that ridicules an opposing point of view. The author of the post states their view, assuming others will agree with them, and “like” their post. Those who don’t can ignore it or state their objection. The object is not compromise or negotiation, but to “win the argument”. Reconciliation is seldom an option! If others can’t agree, you remove their response or “unfriend” them. That’s how it goes everyday. Or you can stick with showing pictures of your pets, your family and grandchildren. That’s how community happens on social media!

In politics we don’t have many positive examples of negotiation or compromise, or listening to seek understanding – at least not in public. Backroom negotiations to put together compromise legislation that everyone can agree to seems a thing of the past. Now it is win or lose. One side has the votes and gets what they want, or nothing gets done. You don’t like it? I’ll see you in court!

So all of this filters out into society, into our public discourse, to everyone’s detriment. It can “feel” better to call someone a “racist” and belittle them, or to call an opponent who seeks the common good a “Socialist”, than to listen more and find a way to seek understanding, and move the person we feel so strongly is wrong back into the community, where we can all grow together. That’s too hard.

Out in the world, the most common goal for humans is not restoration but winning at all costs. Not to listen, but to have others listen to us. Not to find common ground for our differences, but to turn our neighbor’s (or rather, our adversary’s) point of view into agreement with ours, by force – not reason – if necessary. Most of us have been guilty of this, if we are honest.

But God turns our whole world upside down by giving us the harder, but better task of listening for understanding. Not to win, but for the sake of restoring the community of faith and for the sake of the world. Often we are not able to do this – listen for the goal of reconciliation - even for the sake of our own families, church or communities. We can be our own worst enemies! We can expend so much energy, time and money into tearing our own relationships or communities

apart, when we could be working to build them back up. All for the sake of winning, for revenge or for spite. But Jesus gives us a better way, which is the way of love. Jesus shows us how to love each other with a love that is self-giving, which begins when we choose to listen, and be vulnerable enough to change.

In Paul's letter, he says Christians don't have time to stay in our disagreements and sins against each other. *"You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near....So let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ."*

Paul was talking about the coming Day of the Lord, the return of Jesus and the salvation that he saw coming soon. Well, we don't know when that will be – Jesus himself didn't know the day or the hour. But Jesus did say that the Kingdom of God was already with us, inside you and me, as we live by faith. But you and I can also look at this in another way.

There is much going on these days that bring danger to us and to others: the growing hatreds that are festering over differences in religion or politics, our growing awareness of racism that cause death and destruction every day, the violence that turns common disagreements into tragedy, suffering and even death. We don't have time to waste on our disagreements without resolving them, because the consequences, we see now, are so dangerous. So many people are suffering from sickness, from economic loss, from prejudice and hate, which are so often made worse by our politics, by race or religion. We don't have time for this! We have to stop the violence and the hate, to bring our communities back together and start the healing. We have to stop the shouting and start to listen to each other.

And it begins here with us, today, with people of faith as we gather together in prayer. God has gathered us for a purpose, even here on Zoom, when we cannot be together physically in our places of worship, to gather in new ways to pray! To find ways to reach out to those whom we have never heard, so that we might listen and understand. Who is that for you in your life? Is it a family member, or a friend where a relationship is broken? Is it a neighbor down the street, who you have maybe never met? Is it that Facebook "Friend" who always argues with you?

The antidote to many of our conflicts and broken relationships can usually be found by listening and forgiving each other, which can be a very big step for us. God gives us the model, when we hear these words in our liturgy of confession and absolution: *"God hears the cries of all who call out in need, and through his death and resurrection, Christ has made us his own. Hear the truth that God proclaims: Your sins are forgiven in the name of Jesus Christ. Led by the Holy Spirit, let us live in freedom and newness to do God's work in the world." Amen.*