

September 10, 2023  
Pentecost 14 – Proper 18A  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson

*Exodus 12:1-14*

*Psalms 149*

*Romans 13:8-14*

*Matthew 18:15-20*

*In the Name of the One who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.*

Listen again to Paul's words to the Romans, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Well, I suppose my work here this morning is done. *Love one another*. That should be easy, shouldn't it?

In love, as in so many things, we humans (this human, anyway) long for, pray for, a checklist. Then, like Santa, we make a list and check it twice, to determine who's naughty (them) and who's nice (me). We get wrapped around the axle about the "what" and the "what if" of love, leaving the "why" for another day.

In Paul's many writings about relationships within the community that is the Body of Christ, there are many lists of behaviors acceptable and unacceptable, of do's and don'ts.

But in today's passage, Paul does something different. The list is condensed, and focused on something both tangible and close-by. "See that neighbor?" Paul asks, "love that person as you love yourself." In other words, act out to the other the best intentions you would wish for yourself.

*Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.* Or, as John Lennon reminded us in 1967, *All you need is love. Love, love, love.* Just saying it makes us feel good. But is that all there is to love? Feeling good?

I invite you to think back for a moment. When and how did you first learn that love is more than a feeling? Love is, of course, a word with lots of layers. We love a particular flavor of ice cream. We love our team. Cubs or Cards? Hoosiers or Boilermakers. In these matters, you must be able to read the room. In the wrong company, the scene could become distinctly unloving!

It is in relationship, in that space between you and someone else, that we begin to see that love is more than a feeling. For instance, you can say “I love you” to someone, over and over, and still control them and the relationship by keeping them at arm’s length.

Paul is telling us that love is not a thing that can be possessed or bestowed, but is an action, as in *they will know we are Christians by our love*. Now, that may call to mind the cool and groovy vibe of the 1960’s, but it is deeply embedded in our DNA as Christians. It is explicit in John’s gospel *By this shall everyone know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another* (13:35), and echoed by other early Christian writers to describe what made the Christian community different.<sup>1</sup>

So, now, let’s turn to Matthew to think about how this active, relational love works within a community. At first blush, today’s section of the gospel sounds like rules of engagement for combat. It can be read as a legal checklist of what to do to maintain some semblance of order. *If someone offends you, confront them. If that doesn’t work, try an intervention. If that fails, cut them off and kick them out.* As far as rules go, it’s pretty straightforward; concerned with “what” to do in the case of conflict.

But, what if Matthew’s point is less about having a code of conduct and more about regaining a sibling within the community. In other words, what if it’s less about the “what” of love and more about the “why.”

The verses immediately before this passage describe God’s delight in gathering back sheep that have strayed, and a warning not to despise others, especially those who seem of little account to you.

The verses that follow set a new standard for forgiveness (seventy times seven!) and then show us that there is a connection between our ability to forgive others and our capacity to be forgiven.

The context of today’s gospel makes me think that to read this passage as a legal playbook isn’t so much wrong as it is too small. Matthew is presuming the

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<sup>1</sup> A wonderful example is Tertullian (145-200), *Apologeticus*, chapter 39. Tertullian writes an apology (explanation) to refute pagan criticisms of Christian life. “But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. *See, they say, how they love one another, for themselves are animated by mutual hatred.*”

presence of a Christian community, a gathered body seeking to regain, to restore the lost and the least.

Matthew seems to be offering us his own experience of the work required to maintain relationships, and the knowledge that building and nurturing a community is harder than it looks.

Just think about it. Talking to someone about your concern or grievance is much harder than talking about them. Gathering others to listen closely is, I imagine, more difficult than posting something on social media. And working out disputes together within community, rather than simply passing judgment, can be really, really hard.

And, what about those who find themselves outside of the community, like Gentiles or tax collectors? Let's take a moment to remember how Jesus treated Gentiles, tax collectors, and every other sort of lost sheep: with love, healing, compassion, and rejoicing. Restoration, not rejection.

Let's face it, authentic community can be difficult to find; and it can be tougher to maintain. But the Christian community is a powerful witness to the world about the love of God, who we claim *proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8).

I invite you to take a moment right now and look at the people around you. Each and every one of you is a gift that God has given to the rest of us. Each and every one of you is a gift for the building up of the Body of Christ.

Now, let's go a little deeper, and imagine. Imagine the hopes, the fears, the needs, the dreams and, yes, even the wounds that are here in this gathered body. Now, imagine how, together, equipped with the experience of Christ's compassion, we might become a community more gracious in restoring the lost. That's cause for rejoicing, but it's not the end of the story.

God calls us into community not for our own sake. This may be hard to hear, but we are not about me and Jesus. We're not even here about Grace Episcopal Church and Jesus. We are called by God into the community of Christ's body to serve the world that God loves so much. That is why we are here.

What we do in this place, and at this table is crucial because it forms us and nourishes us to be beacons of Christ in the world – the world out there. To feed the hungry on Sunday afternoons, to offer a face of welcome and

affirmation at Juneteenth and Muncie Pride, to share the beauty of this space with the community at a neighborhood festival next weekend.

You won't be surprised that my prayer is that you, we, this particular part of the Body of Christ, will continue to become more visible in this city we call home. If we're going to take being a beacon seriously, we've got to let folks know that we're here.

Paul writes *now is the moment for you to wake from sleep*, and his urgency should sound as crisp to us as it did to the church at Rome: *The night is far gone, the day is near*.

God is calling you – not the theoretical people that may one day be here, nor those who have decided to be somewhere else. God is calling you. Here. Now.

The world we inhabit, God's world, is broken and hurting – earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, disease and death, injustice and intolerance, not to mention the heartaches and hopes that lie deep within each of us. All these concerns, both great and small, cry out to be cared for, to be held, to be redeemed by the Body of Christ. God is calling us to be the Body of Christ for the world. This is “why” we are here.

If and when you grow weary of following the path that Jesus has set before you, remember to remind each other that Jesus has promised to be with us. This is why we gather every week as the Body of Christ to receive the Body of Christ in the Eucharist.

What we say and do together is always said and done in the presence of our Lord and it's a promise that the hard work of community, reconciliation, and restoration is never done alone, but always with Jesus' presence and assistance.

The night is far gone, the day is near. Teach us how to love each other, lift us to the joy divine. And may the world know we are Christians by our love. Amen.