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The Fifteenth Sunday of Pentecost

A Community of Reconcilers

The Reverend Garrett Yates
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church



I was out for dinner with a few fellas from church on Friday, when we struck up a conversation with our waiter. We were talking about where we experience Spirit in our lives – those places where we feel most connected to God and the sacredness of life. We pitched the question to Brian our waiter, asking him where he experienced the Spirit in his life, and without missing a beat he said, “barefoot in the wilderness.” “For me, there is just nothing like being in the woods to calm my mind and give me a sense of peace.” Brian was a Ph.D. student in education, and it just so turns out a religious studies and philosophy major in college, so we had quite the exchange over the course of dinner. As we were out in the parking lot about to leave, he came hurriedly out the door to thank us for the conversation and the tip, and then one of the guys, a parishioner here said, “Brian there is one other question we forgot to ask you: where do you experience community in your life?” Brian, took a pause, and then another pause, and said, “You know I really don’t. I have a wife and a daughter. I have a great teaching gig, and I work here on weekends. But I’m not sure I really have one.” “Well, check out St. Anne’s sometime, services at 8 and 10,” one of the guys said.

There seems to be a unique hungering for community, for a group of people to share life’s journey with, a group bigger than just family, classroom, and workspace, a longing for a kind of soul space. And yet, I sense there to also be a hesitation about joining a community. After all, communities are messy. They are full of people. And they can’t help but form committees and they take forever to agree on things like lightbulbs and carpet colors and building and rectory renovations. We live in a spiritual age that is longing for community. And yet, community – let’s not romanticize it – is hard and labor-intensive work.

This morning Jesus holds up for us a vision for what might be distinctive about a community formed in his name. The word at the heart of this gospel is reconciliation. Christians are called to be members of a reconciling community. A community that is showing forth to the world what it means to be reconciled. Reconciled with God, reconciled with others, reconciled with creation, reconciled with our families, reconciled with our friends, and perhaps most difficult of all, reconciled with our own lives. The mark of community formed in Jesus’ name is that they are seeking an identity deeper than their differences. They are seeking to show forth the power of reconciliation. But to speak

of reconciliation is to make the assumption that there are things we need to be reconciled to. There are aspects of the world we aren't in sync with. If God's beautiful creation is a song that God never tires of singing into being, reconciliation assumes that there is more than a little in our lives that is out of tune. Jesus begins in our reading this morning: "If someone sins against you in the reconciling community, go and talk to them directly...."

I'd almost interpret this "if" as a "when." When human beings get together for any length of time, sin happens. I've long had a theory about Christian theology that one of the reasons a word like "sin" is so hard to talk about now is that talk of sin is fundamentally a communal experience. I have sinned against another. But in a society that is creeping towards individualism and social distancing, we are able to withdraw ourselves from situations that we feel might be escalating towards conflict; and if someone has sinned against us we can just tell ourselves that so and so is toxic and we just don't need that kind of negativity in our lives. We simply leave and go home. We may even consider finding a new group of friends or a new community.

Well, its not the cheeriest message in the world, but I'm here to tell you that St. Anne's, or a parishioner in our community, will very likely let you down at some point. It happens. We are not stained glass saints. We are human beings. And last I checked, this is all our first time undertaking this experiment in being human. We've never done it before. When we begin to see each other as fellow first-timers we have a lot more compassion and curiosity, and in the face of conflict we don't just head for the door. Instead we humbly, gently, courageously say to our brother or sister, "can we talk?"

We often shrink back from these words. Instead of approaching the person who has sinned against us and asking them to talk, we just move ahead and talk about them to others. We do it, albeit unconsciously, as a way to nourish our own sense of righteousness. It is very hard to realize reconciliation when we are convinced of our own rightness. And the desire to call out, shame, even humiliate the offender is ever present and abiding. But Jesus has no time for humiliation. He says, "Talk to the one who has offended you alone, in private. Don't involve others through gossip. Pray for the courage to handle it yourself. Invite the other person to talk – they are meant to be talked to, and not about."

Of course just because we muster the courage to address something another has done, doesn't guarantee reconciliation. Jesus acknowledges that your brother or sister might not listen to you, or they may take offense and blame you. That's the point at which the situation has got bigger than just you and your brother or sister. That's the moment, says Jesus, it's time to bring in others. These others may end up showing you it was you who was mistaken. Or they may help to persuade your friend.

If these others fail, it may be necessary to move to a third stage. This means bringing in people who don't know the parties involved directly. But remember, the whole point is not to win, not to humiliate, but to persuade, to move from face-to-face confrontation to side-by-side collaboration. The point is getting to a place of reconciled fellowship. It's about getting to the place where both parties are able to say thank you. And if all that fails, says Jesus, there is a fourth stage. The person should be treated as a Gentile or a tax collector, which I imagine Jesus said with something of a twinkle in his eye. Matthew, our gospel writer, was a tax collector, after all. Treating someone as a tax collector might mean creating distance between you and the person you are in conflict; it might mean closing off communication; but it never means we can close our hearts.

Jesus concludes by saying three things that put these interpersonal interactions in a larger context. "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven." In other words, these confrontations, little or trivial as they may seem, really matter. They matter because they're crucial to building character, crucial to saving our souls, and crucial to building the church. Find a way of talking about the little hurts and misunderstandings, and you'll be learning how to make a good marriage, a good neighborhood, a good community. Find a way of naming and addressing sin and resentment, and you'll be beginning to see how to relate to people who insult you, people who defraud you, people who ignore you. You'll be learning how to bind and loose.

Then Jesus says, "If two of you agree on anything you ask, it will be done for you." In other words, everything is possible. This is not a zero-sum game, where either I turn out to be totally right or I realize I was a complete fool and I'm going to feel like an idiot for the rest of my life. If two people are reconciled, if one says "Sorry, forgive me" and the other says "Thank you, I do forgive you" and the first says "Thank you too, I never realized what a

burden this was until you made it clear to me and now I feel I have gained a friend” – if you learn to anticipate and practice and expect these kinds of conversations, then there is no limit to what God can do for you.

And then finally Jesus says “Where two or three are gathered, I am there.” Jesus doesn’t just give us friends to help us over the mountains and across the rivers of life. He gives us himself. He makes the woman whose son had been murdered meet, confront, befriend, and finally adopt the boy who murdered her son. He makes a man whose wife had an affair seek out and come to love the man he had once cursed and hated. He makes an African American civil rights leader in a southern city befriend a man who had led the Ku Klux Klan. Such stories can take several years of pain and tears. They depend on God’s strength, way beyond the strength of the parties involved. And each depends on one person finding the courage to say, ‘Can we talk?’ Where two or three deeply want to find forgiveness and reconciliation, want to meet God in one another and find an extraordinary friend, but cannot find the strength or the courage or the words or the way, Jesus says, “I am there among them. This is what I lived for: this is what I died for. This may take years. But this is what I am all about. I am there.”

I need to tell you a story that has hugely shaped my life in ministry, a back to school story about my first month in school, in Ms. Clark’s kindergarten class. My teacher Ms. Clark was away one Friday, and we had a substitute teacher whose name I can’t remember, but who I was sure was out to make me move my clothespin from green to yellow. Indeed, she nabbed me trying to execute a prank during naptime – I think I was tickling people’s ear with a feather. So Ms. Substitute Teacher sent me home with my report card, and sure enough, there was a frowny face on it, and beside the frowny face it simply said, “I misbehaved today.” I had to get my parents to sign the report card, but first I had a plan. I snuck into my mom’s office and found some of her whiteout. I whited out the frown and drew a smile, and I whited out “mis” so it just read: “I behaved today.” I was a very mischievous child. Sneaky. And from a very early age, I hated to risk being judged, or seen, or in the wrong. I still hate it. And anytime I’m in the wrong, I still go looking for that whiteout. Why is it that human heart is so inextricably in love with preserving its own innocence? In many ways, I’m still that boy. But God is also making me someone who is more than that boy.

Church is showing me a different way to be in the world. Jesus points towards something deeper than being right; Jesus is slowly relieving me of the burden of having to pretend. Because I'm learning that it's actually where there is conflict, where I sense there to be a wrong, that just there is the possibility to encounter God. And I'm discovering that there is something so much deeper than my individual peace and happiness. I'm discovering God's call to be reconciled to all things. To discover a connection and a unity that runs deeper than the deepest hurt. I'm learning how God reconciles me to my past through the forgiveness of sin, to the present through the gift of silence and prayer, and to the uncertainty of the future by giving me a community to lean on, and walk with.

Church is messy. Community is hard. But it is also so beautiful. Here we are, gathered as a community, a fellowship of people on the journey of life. And through caring for each other, through sticking with each other, through having tough but holy conversation, through being challenged to seek reconciliation in all things – we are bearing witness to a love and a joy and a goodness that outlasts our divisions and endures as the still small voice whispering Beloved into every square inch of the universe. And we are learning that if we don't just head for the door when conflict and confrontation arises, we might just open ourselves to grace, to that holy confrontation with the God who made us, and saved us, and reconciles us to our own lives, to one another, and providing us with the two things our culture most longs for, community and purpose. Both find a clue for their meaning in the reconciling-God-made-flesh in the body of Jesus; both find their nourishment in the fellowship of reconciliation we call church.

