

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 2023
9/10/2023
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Matthew 18:15-20

The images are dramatic.

In Clearwater Beach, Florida, the photo of a black police officer carrying an elderly white woman through the water. Another photo of an Hispanic firefighter rescuing a Korean family from their flooded home. People of every race and language, helping neighbors whose home were destroyed by the August hurricane.

In the days following the arrival of Hurricane Idalia, we started to see these images. We saw similar images of rescue efforts in Hawaii after the devastating fires.

For many of us these images were a source of hope. For a moment, at least, we did not have to focus on arguments about school curriculum policies, or listen to the shouts of people from the extreme opposites of the political landscape. For a moment, we saw Americans being Americans, humans being human.

Don't get me wrong – hurricanes don't give us an excuse not to confront important issues. We have many things to deal with as a nation.

But many of us looked at the photos from Florida, and we were relieved. Because in the aftermath of a natural disaster, the things that divide us could be put into proper perspective.

In the hours and days after the Florida hurricane, people of every race, language and way of life helped their neighbors of every race language and way of life. Everyone faced a common challenge, and everyone worked toward a common goal – making sure that the other human beings around them were safe and taken care of.

In moments like this, it seems we acknowledge something we should never forget: that we are all part of the human family, and that every human being has dignity and value.

At end of today's Gospel, Jesus reminds us that wherever human beings are, he is there, in our midst. He is there, wherever two or three people are gathered in his name, because he is present in every human being. Every human being is created in God's image and their life is God's precious gift.

We remember that – at least in moments like this. Neighbors just help neighbors. And those of us who live a little further away also have an instinct to help.

I don't live in Florida, or Hawaii. So, my church community has worked to raise charitable donations which can be sent to both states.

When I make a donation in moments like this, it is my way of saying – on a personal level - to every resident of Florida - black, white, Hispanic, African American, Asian, liberal, conservative, gay, straight – you are my brother, you are my sister.

The Christ who lives in me is the Christ who lives in you. And if I have any means to help, I must help. This is what love requires. I see Christ in you. And I treat you with that dignity.

So far, so good?

But there is more to today's Gospel than an encouragement to respect and love hurricane victims in another state. In fact, respecting and loving hurricane victims a thousand miles from here often feels easy. Write the check, tell yourself you've helped, then go home and do a Zoom meeting!

But in today's Gospel, Jesus asks – actually, he demands – that we not limit our respect and love to people a thousand miles away. Jesus asks and demands that we respect and love the people right in front of us. Even the people with whom we disagree. Even the ones who may have done something that has hurt us or angered us.

This is where it gets harder!

Jesus says: If your sister or brother sins against you; if they've done something that has hurt you, confused you, harmed you... here is how a Christian handles it...

If your neighbor sins against you - has said or done something which leaves you shaking your head - here is how a Christian responds...

Go and talk with them.

When something has happened between you and someone else, when something difficult has arisen, go and talk with them. Do not talk about them to everyone else.

Frankly, I think this is one of Jesus' most ignored teachings. And we ignore it at the risk of our souls. I think it is ignored because it can often be just so hard.

When someone hurts me or does something with which I disagree, Jesus demands that I go and speak with them. It's easy to love a hurricane victim 1000 miles away. But Jesus also calls me to love the person near me who just made a decision that I disagree with.

It's easy to say, "Isn't it nice that all of the different people in Clearwater are loving each other?" But what happens when the person next to me says or does something that I don't approve of? Or it hurts me?

The Gospel demands that the Christ in me must honor the Christ in them. The Jesus who loves that other person wants you to love that other person. And that love is expressed in the concrete way that you respect their dignity as a child of God.

So the instructions of Jesus are clear. If someone sins against you, hurts you or does something that causes you pain:

- + go and speak with them about it, alone, one on one.
- + and if that does not work, try again!

- + then take someone with you to talk together
- + then ask for the help of the church
- + and only after all of that has failed, then you can treat them like a “Gentile or tax collector.”

(But before you assume that this means that you can dismiss them or ‘cancel’ them, or post an angry message about them on Facebook, remember: this is Matthew’s Gospel. And what job did Matthew have? He was a tax collector? And how did Jesus treat this tax collector? He made him an Apostle, and loved him!)

These instructions from Jesus are clear. They sound so simple. But the behavior described in this Gospel passage runs counter to what were often told to do by the culture we live in.

Even people who call themselves ‘faithful Christians’ ignore this teaching of Jesus on a regular basis.

How? Here’s an example:

- + I get an email from someone, and I am upset by it. So instead of calling the person and asking to speak directly to them about it, I forward that email to 7 friends, with a comment, “Can you believe she did this?”
- + OR - a member of your family says or does something that hurts you in some way. Instead of speaking with them, you go to social media and post angry words for all to see.
- + OR - your boss makes a decision with which you disagree IN fact, you think it’s a hurtful decision. Instead of going to speak with your boss, you spend the next month tearing them down at the coffee machine.
- + OR - your former spouse hurts you deeply. Instead of speaking with them about it, you take every opportunity to speak ill of them in front of your children.
- + OR - your pastor says something you don’t like. You don’t speak with him or her seeking deeper understanding... instead you send out a tweet calling your pastor a heretic.
- + your neighbor – whose skin is a different color than yours – says something at a dinner party that gets you mad. So you go home and rant to your spouse. But what does Jesus say? “Go and talk with them.”

Jesus does not provide any wiggle room here. I wish he did, because I know that this is not an easy teaching, and I know that I do not carry it out perfectly.

Still, we are inspired when we see people - very different people – working together, speaking together, striving together to help one another... perhaps after a storm.

But it’s harder to work together, respect each other, speak together, when the person you’re struggling with has a face and a name and is right in front of you.

Loving neighbors from a distance is easy.

Loving a neighbor who has hurt you is much harder.

Loving those with whom we disagree is a hard Gospel task.

I suspect that Jesus knew that his disciples would hear these words and wonder – is this really possible?
Can we really do what he's asking?

Can we do it?

Not if we rely simply on our own strength, our own wisdom, our own ways. Maybe that is why Jesus includes this thoroughly encouraging sentence in the midst of this challenging teaching. Jesus says -

If two of you agree on earth about anything for which you are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.

Jesus never asks us to do anything alone or in isolation.

He reminds us that the kind of healing, honest conversations he's describing will only be possible if we root those conversations in prayer.

I, myself, can't do what Jesus asks in today's text. But he's not asking me to do it by myself. He's reminding me that HE can do it in me, and through me. It all starts with prayer.

He shows us the way. He teaches us how. And in his word and sacrament, he gives us the grace and strength we need, to begin...

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