

Lectionary 23A 2017, Matthew 18:15-20, Romans 13:8-14, September 10, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

It all comes down to basics, doesn't it? In our second reading from the letter to the Romans, St. Paul tells us that the entirety of Christian ethics can be summed up in the simple sentence, "Love your neighbor as yourself." You would think that this command is so basic, so foundational to living the Christian life that we should, by now, two thousand years after Jesus' earthly ministry, have it down just right. Jesus himself says, "A new commandment I give you, that you should love one another as I have loved you, you also should love one another." The apostle John says the same thing, "Beloved, let us love one another, for such love is from God." And Peter in a letter says, "Love one another deeply, from the heart."

So how is it that something so basic, so fundamental and essential, seems to be so difficult among those who call themselves followers of Jesus? Not necessarily among those here at Emmanuel who try to follow Jesus. Although I will admit that I don't know everything about your lives, and don't know if there are secret places in your hearts where some unloving attitude or thought is being held about someone else. But on a larger scale I see Christians who call themselves progressive speak hatefully of Christians who call themselves evangelical, and vice versa. And its only gotten a lot worse in this era of social media where it seems that hiding behind a computer screen gives license to lob verbal hand-grenades of hate against someone you disagree with. Why does loving one another seem so difficult and so elusive among those who seek to follow Jesus?

There are probably lots of different reasons. Whenever conflict arises our natural inclination is to walk away. I think this is true for all kinds of groups we belong to, not just churches. It could be its just part of our tendency not to confront those with whom we are in conflict. At first we try to ignore the situation. But that doesn't really work. Because feelings don't really go away. We bottle them up, tell ourselves it really doesn't matter, try to get on with things. But there's always something that reminds us of the original event that started it all.

I've been a pastor long enough, and involved with lots of people over the years, to see what unresolved conflict does to families, or communities, or congregations. Even among people who otherwise consider themselves faithful disciples of Jesus. Hurt turns into silence, which may then slide into animosity and then festers into resentment, bitterness and anger. Families and churches square off against each other, and community and love often disappear.

Real love isn't easy. When things are going along well, and everyone is working together and no one's feelings are getting hurt, love may seem like the easiest thing in the world. But let someone say the wrong thing, or act selfishly, or abuse someone else's trust and then the real test of Jesus' words to love one another becomes a real challenge.

Love is all about relationships. Love is all about creating and maintaining community, and community is always relational. It doesn't matter what kind of community we're taking about. A family is a community. A congregation is a community. All of Jesus' followers throughout the whole world is a community. A neighborhood is a community. A workplace is a community. A school is a community. We live in, and are members of, lots of different communities. Living in community is often difficult. Maintaining a community is hard. And when community is threatened or is fractured, it's extremely hard to put it back together.

We know what it takes to mend a relationship that's broken. But that's often the one thing we don't want to do. To forgive, and to be forgiven is really the only way. Notice the two-way street. Both are essential. Both are crucial for genuine love to exist. Real love is realistically

sober when it comes to human nature. Real love, if it is to exist at all, means acknowledging both yourself and others as imperfect, fallible, halting, human beings. Love means needing to say “I’m sorry,” when you are wrong, and “you are forgiven,” when someone who has wronged you asks for it.

It’s not always easy. There’s this thing called human pride that gets in the way. Pride is that part of you that says, “I didn’t do anything wrong. He’s the one who needs to apologize. She needs to come to me and say she’s sorry.” When our pride is wounded it’s very tempting to feel that we are in the right. We are the one in the right. We are the one whose been challenged. The trouble is wounded pride is a great deceiver. Wounded pride is an animal with an insatiable appetite. And it can be the very thing that prevents us from experiencing the grace and forgiveness of God and others.

In our gospel reading this morning we hear Jesus give us a way beyond our wounded pride and our inability to forgive and be forgiven. “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” Notice where the responsibility lies. Notice where the action takes place. When you are wronged. This isn’t about when you have done something wrong. Clearly if you have don’t something wrong and you realize it you have a responsibility to make amends. But here Jesus is addressing the situation of wounded pride, of when someone has done something wrong to you. That person may not even realize it. It may have been unintentional. It may not have been. But the goal here is reconciliation. God wants the relationship to be restored. God wants us to live in community.

For its only in living in community with one another that we experience the presence of the risen Jesus. Notice what he says at the end of our gospel today. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Jesus promises to be present when we are in community. Two or three, or ten or twenty, or two hundred or two thousand. But always more than one. And because Jesus lives beyond death his promise to be with us is true. We can count on his promise, we can trust his word, because nothing now stands in the way of his word.

Let me say something about the practical aspect of community life. I once heard a friend say that the largest part of being in community with others is simply showing up. I never really thought about that much before. I always focused on the harder parts, like forgiveness and reconciliation, humility and listening before speaking. But he reminded me that community is built on actual people simply getting acquainted, and the only that’s going to happen is by putting yourself in one place, where people gather, over and over again. It could mean a congregation where they gather on a regular basis for worship, fellowship and service. Or a family. But at the very least community is built on showing up.

Remember, we love because God first loves us. We forgive, because we are forgiven. We reach out to those from we are estranged, because in Christ, God has reached into our lives, our hearts, and our world with his reconciling love. Amen.