

Proper 18, September 10, 2017
St. Andrew's Church
Barbara Ambrose

Matthew 18:15-20

Romans 13:8-14

She enters a hospital room where a newborn is wriggling in a basinet as his awestruck parents marvel at his every move. She shares prayer and communion with the parents as they welcome this new baby and give thanks for his safe arrival. On a different floor, she brings her little black kit to a room where a woman lies in bed, quietly fading from this world in the soft glow of flickering monitors. With hushed voices, the family members give thanks for a life well lived, a life of devotion and faith offering the assurance that soon their mother will be in the nearer presence of the Lord she loves so well.

As a Eucharistic minister, she finds herself in living rooms and parlors of people recovering from surgery or unable to make it to church on Sunday mornings. The makeshift altars are as varied as her surroundings – bed trays, laundry bin lids, coffee and dining tables and sometimes a stack of books or magazines. As she unfolds the small linen corporal and places the miniature chalice and paten upon it she thinks about what Jesus once said, “where two or three are gathered in my name I am there among them,” and she is grateful for this reminder that Jesus is everywhere and everywhere is church.

In our Gospel reading Jesus explores how we should engage one another in church, but because our reading begins midway in a longer narrative, we miss some important information needed to fully understand what Jesus is telling his disciples. The complete narrative begins with Jesus responding to the disciples' query about greatness. He explains that they should become like children noting the childlike trait of humility. He continues with this warning, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better

for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (*Matt. 18:6*)

The parable of the lost sheep follows, and Jesus describes the great joy of the shepherd who finds the sheep that strayed. Like the shepherd he says, “So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little one should be lost.” (*Matt. 18:14*) This juxtaposition of the potentially serious consequences of sin and God’s desire for the redemption of every one of us leads into the passage that we hear today.

Jesus considers how to respond when someone in the community sins against us. He describes a process of perseverance that begins with a conversation between the aggrieved and the sinner, adding a few others to the conversation if the sinner does not listen, and if necessary, involving the entire community to regain this member who has strayed from them.

The striking thing here is that Jesus is calling for frank and respectful conversation with the offender. He says nothing about judgement, reprimand or punishment here – the focus is on reclaiming the person through forgiveness and reconciliation. This is how the story of the shepherd seeking out the lost sheep plays out in everyday life – our response should reflect the desire to return the one who has been lost to his or her rightful place within the flock.¹

Jesus seems to suggest that if all attempts by the members of the congregation are unsuccessful that the next step is to let the sinner go as they would a Gentile or a tax collector. This is unsettling as if Jesus is saying it is all right for disciples to fall back upon old inclinations of discarding those whom they deem unworthy of their care or concern. But then he says this, “Again truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (*Matt. 18:19-20*) In other words, even today we are not left on our own to solve these

issues and risk slipping into our former and limited approaches of engaging with one another. Jesus is right in the midst of us, participating with us in our role as his Body operating in the world. Jesus never ceased caring for the tax collector or the Gentile or anyone he met during his travels, but rather he especially sought after society's outcasts and fully welcomed them as participants in his own ministry. Likewise, we should never cease caring for others, not only those in our midst but also everyone we encounter during our own life journeys.²

In his letter to the Romans, Paul offers us further insight into how we are to engage with one another. He begins with individual commandments that deal with specific behaviors, but then he simplifies matters by lifting up the common denominator that underlies all of the commandments - namely Love. Paul is talking about love in its active form – what we do in response to one another, not how we feel about each other. Our actions toward one another must demonstrate love that is good, uplifting and respectful in intention. We are to offer this active love to everyone – saints and strangers alike.³

Jesus and Paul are speaking directly to followers within the context of specific faith communities, and our own communities are certainly good places to learn how to practice active love and develop a capacity for perseverance in striving for reconciliation with one another. Both Jesus and Paul engaged in expansive ministries that grew in breadth with every mile they traveled and every place they taught. As our Eucharistic minister reminds us Jesus is everywhere and everywhere is indeed church.

It can be difficult to look around and think of everywhere as church, a place where God's love and desire for reconciliation abounds. We often feel surrounded by turmoil and strife, anger and division, oppression and fear as if the world is filled with straying sheep determined to

remain lost. But then something unexpected happens that restores our faith in the transformative power of love in action.

Shelly, one of my dearest friends, lives near Florida's Tampa Bay with her husband, two daughters and two dogs. We talked on Friday and she said it looked like Hurricane Irma would not present much of a problem in their area. Then Irma's path shifted west. Saturday morning, Shelly texted me that they were all headed to South Carolina. I spent much of the day wondering if they would make it there safely or become tied up in slow-moving traffic. In the afternoon, I was relieved when her name popped up on my iPhone and was grateful to hear her voice. She assured me that everyone was OK and they were making good time, then she said, "Barbara I just had to tell you what I have been witnessing for the last several hours. As we are driving away from this storm there are literally thousands of vehicles going in the other direction – convoys of power trucks, boats, tree removal equipment, container trucks from all over the country. All of these people are headed into this dangerous storm to help people that they don't even know. It's just unbelievable."

Church can be anywhere and everywhere. It is this place we are gathered together today. It is in hospitals and homes, and on southbound I-95. It is anywhere and everywhere we are reaching out to others, actively sharing God's love for everyone.

¹ Mitchell G. Reddish, Proper 18 Year A Matthew 18:15-20, Exegetical Perspective" in Feasting on the Word Year A: Volume 4 ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Taylor Brown, (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 45 & 47.

² Charles Hambrick-Stowe, Proper 18 Year A Matthew 18:15-20, Theological Perspective" in Feasting on the Word Year A: Volume 4 ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Taylor Brown, (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 48.

³ Rochelle A. Stackhouse, Proper 18 Year A Romans 13:8-14, Pastoral Perspective" in Feasting on the Word Year A: Volume 4 ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Taylor Brown, (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 42.