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September 10, 2017

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18A: Matthew 18:15-20

No One is Lost

Restoration in the midst of hurricanes is a long, hard process: immediate rescue, short term relief, and long term recovery.¹ Like together, life in God's kingdom is a process, too.

Today's appointed Gospel reading is the center of a larger talk from Jesus to his disciples. This particular talk is his long response to the disciples question in Matthew 18: 1 "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" What we hear from Jesus today is nestled in the center of his response to this question from those who follow him.

Jesus began his answer by placing child among the disciples, and saying , "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." He warns them of the seriousness of placing obstacles before the most vulnerable ones, the ones without any social standing, the ones who wonder and dream about what could be instead of being satisfied with what is.

Jesus goes on "If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, doesn't he leave the ninety-nine to search for the one? And if that one is found, certainly the shepherd rejoices more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray." Jesus says to his disciples, "The will of *our* Father is that no one is lost."

Today's Gospel reading immediately follows. Eugene Peterson's paraphrase goes like this:

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ "If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend. If he won't listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won't listen, tell the church. If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love.

¹⁸⁻²⁰ "Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I'll be there."

On the surface, especially when heard without the wider context in Matthew, today's Gospel seems to be about setting your fellow church goer straight, and if they don't fly right, let them go. After all, justice is often tied with punishment. Who stole the cookie from the cookie jar? We want to know and we want more than the

¹ Episcopal Relief and Development notes there are 3 phases of a disaster: rescue, relief, and recovery. See www.episcopalrelief.org/what-we-do/us-disaster-program/disasterhelp for more information.

cookie back. And if someone can't get with the program, then they need to leave. We may not say it, but I think we all think it. And then, who wants to talk of pain? Can't we just move forward together? Why cause a racket when things are already so complicated? Why not trust that as the popular proverb goes "time heals all wounds"?

Well, because doing so is not authentic community according to Jesus. Real community. Christian community. Not the kind when you always feel good. Not the kind where you never disagree. Not the kind when you are always right. Not the kind where you are never alone. The community that Jesus shares with his disciples in word and in deed is not one bent on comparison, scarcity, and sentimentality.

When faced with the question who is the greatest when and where God rules, he places a vulnerable one among them, warns of putting something in their way, tells a story about the joy of finding ones who is lost and restoring them to the flock. Then he encourages them to leave their comfort zone and seek out one another. Not for the purpose of punishment, by no means. Seeking for the purpose of finding because our Father's will is that no one is lost.

The community Jesus wants his disciples to practice does not depend on everyone liking this the same thing, living in the same place, or looking the same way. Our father's will is that we care enough about the other to humble ourselves, to go out and seek fellow followers and speak the truth of our heart in love. We don't gossip. We don't rant on Facebook. We put our assumptions on hold and rumble with our own feelings. We pick up the phone or meet for coffee. If restoration is not yet unfolding, then we involve some other trusted, mature ones to help in the process. No one is on trial here and these are not character witnesses, these are wise ones affected by this dispute.

If the one still remains apart from the 99, then there's some serious pain and there's something underneath for the whole community to consider with great humility, thought, and prayer. What does to treat the offender "as a Gentile and a tax collector" mean? Well, scholars are all over the map on this. However, there is some consensus. In the same way that we considered the surrounding context of today's Gospel, let's remember that Jesus welcomed tax collectors and Gentiles into his midst. Matthew the evangelist was a tax collector after all! You see, we are called to live in real community. We are called to seek each other out. We are to loosen our grip on being right and bind ourselves to one another as decisively revealed in Jesus. We are called to the very righteousness of God.

The holy, messy work of real community is living prayer. Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words. When we engage in this work, when we have the courage for such loving authenticity, we listen to that of God in one another. And God goes into action through us and through our struggles for restoration. Our Father's will is not that we always feel good. Of course, our father's will, is never destruction. Our Father's will for Jesus' band of believers then and now is that no one is lost.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, Jesus is there among them. Jesus is always willing to work for us, with us, through us. He knows what such courageous conversations are like in his body. Jesus is with us, wherever two or three Christians are gathered on Sunday and any day of the week, Jesus is there.

Hoping and praying that we will remember that we're just as lost as the next sheep and that God's we will all be found together.

Thanks be to God that the greatest in the kingdom of God is not any one, but the seeking and finding of the one. The loosing and releasing of hurt and the binding and connecting of the flock. The pasture that is wide enough for real anxieties, hopes, and fears. Dear people of St. Alban's, take heart. The Good Shepherd is in the world seeking, finding, restoring. For where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, Jesus is there among them. *Our father's will is that no one is lost. Amen.*