

17th Week after Pentecost, Proper 18 – Year A – September 10, 2008 - Homily
Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20
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The Enneagram is a personality-typing tool. It can also be a helpful for our spiritual growth. Like the Myers-Briggs test, the Enneagram can help us understand our personality quirks and hot buttons, and also to be aware of how others see things differently. There are nine different personality types according to the Enneagram system. Like all of these tools, individuals tend to have a predominant type, but that doesn't exclude traits from some or several other personality groups. It can be a little blurry. The nine Enneagram types have been labeled in several ways, including the reformer; the helper; the achiever; the individualist; the investigator; the loyalist; the enthusiast; the challenger; and the peacemaker. The labels are pretty descriptive of the personality types. What is interesting is that only one of these types expresses the kind of personality trait that has a hint of conflict engagement. If you haven't already guessed, that is the challenger type. Frankly, it is well known amongst clergy circles that we tend to be in a special sub-group of conflict avoiders! Yet, I don't think clergypersons are alone. Confrontation and conflict are not pleasant for the vast majority of people – except maybe those challenger types!

This evening's reading from the Gospel of Matthew provides us with Jesus' advice about dealing with differences, disagreements, conflict and wholesale sinful rebellion amongst believers. As we can see, sin is a major cause of conflict within the church as well as outside of the Body of believers. It seems that if you have more than one person in a room, there will be just as many opinions as people present. This does not mean that Jesus' prayer for unity in the church does not apply or is somehow impossible to achieve. Unity in diversity is the fundamental nature of the Body of Christ – we all have different spiritual gifts, we are not homogenous by any means. Yet our Lord calls us to live in peace and harmony with one another as far as possible.

In fact, this passage from Matthew is an elegant reflection of how God is constantly working for the restoration and reconciliation of all creation to God's self. It begins with restoration to the community of faith, through true repentance, forgiveness and compassion, in precisely the way that God works. In the Lord's Prayer, we say it clearly: "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." God's desire is always for reconciliation within the Body of Christ, into the Body of Christ, and to God's self. What we see in this step-by-step approach is not only gentleness, but an important facet of every Christian's life in community. That is accountability. We are each responsible to one another to hold each other accountable for words and deeds that do not honor God, or are downright sinful. If one bad apple can spoil the whole bushel, then the same is true in a Christian community. Our Baptismal covenant says this: "Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?" Sinful behavior is inevitable, but every single member of Christ's Body is responsible for confronting that sin and evil and calling the perpetrator to account. The strength of all Christian community comes from this simple check and balance.

The format Jesus proposes to accomplish this necessary work of Christian love in community is initially gentle. We are only human, and so we do not always get it right either, but requesting a one on one conversation is an important first step to dealing with a perceived wrong. The method progresses to calling in at least two witnesses. This is a classic Judaic response based on the Torah, where a person cannot be convicted of wrongdoing without the testimony of at least two witnesses. More and more members of the church are called to be involved if the member refuses to listen. As Jesus says, at some point, outright disobedience and willfulness against God cannot be tolerated within a community of believers. It is unhealthy and disruptive. For the sake of the community, we have to

come to the point where we deliver some tough love. Tough love is exclusion from the communion of believers, until such a time as there is evidence of true repentance.

Nineteenth century Scottish clergyman, William Mackergo Taylor has these words of wisdom, “True repentance hates the sin, and not merely the penalty, and it hates the sin most of all because it has discovered and felt God’s love.” Take the example of a criminal who commits repeated robberies. She or he may well be fearful of being caught, and especially of getting jail time for their crimes – but that fear is based on the risk of punishment. That kind of fear isn’t a deterrent to the robber from committing more robberies. Generally, robbers go on robbing until they are caught, irrespective of what society has defined as the fit punishment for the crime. How many of us, as children or adults have not really been sorry for something we have said or done against another – until we were caught out – and then we were sorry mostly because we got caught! I’ve been there, and I expect many of you have too. A deeply insightful Japanese proverb says this, “Forgiving the unrepentant is like drawing pictures on water.”

So what does true repentance entail? It is the overwhelming desire to turn our lives around and stop doing sinful things. It comes about when we truly understand how deeply God abhors sin and evil, and you and I also embrace that hatred of sin. It is God’s way of molding us by His love. It is being filled in heart and mind with God’s love and God’s Word to the point where we cannot bear to distance ourselves from that love through sin. At that juncture, whatever our sinful desire is, we begin to see it more and more through God’s eyes for what it really is – ugly.

In recent years, many people have embraced a kind of “live and let live” philosophy. That tells us that we should mind our own business and that we have no right to call others to account or to judge others for what they say or do. As with many things in the world, that is not the way of God’s kingdom. It is a kind of false humility and a lie. You and I know who the father of lies is. The reason Satan would want everyone to do their own thing becomes obvious in the revealing light of God’s Word. We are not loving one another if we forgive without the evidence of true repentance. That’s just cheap grace and condoning sinfulness. Nor are we expressing God’s love if we continue to let members of the Body of Christ behave badly towards ourselves, others, or against God. There may not many of us who are challenger types in the Enneagram personality picture, but failing to confront sin and evil is truly failing to follow Christ’s way, and live into the transformational love of our Baptismal covenant.

The Christ-like way of restoration and reconciliation in community is ultimately a series of gentle steps, because every single one of us will need forgiveness and compassion throughout our lives. You and I will always need another chance to do right and to change our lives around. Above all, in our own weakness, we all need the community of faith to help us stay strong in God’s goodness and righteousness. In our Baptismal covenant, we reply to each of the questions with these words, “I will with God’s help.” Yet in Jesus’ wisdom, we see not only how much we need God, but how much we need one another as well.

Let us pray. Lord God, strengthen us to confront sin and evil in our own lives and those of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Grant us the fullness of Your love that we may desire only to do your will on earth, and further your kingdom, to the glory of your Name.

Amen.