

NOT JUST ANY PLACE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

September 7, 2008

Scripture: Exodus 12:1-14;

Matthew: 18:15-20

September has come around and it's back to school. Students have returned to the dorms that line Fifth Avenue and the Village around us. The Nursery School revs up tomorrow morning, with lots of nervous parents and excited kids. It's hurricane season, a sure sign that summer is ending.

And the economic news is bad these days. The market is not yet showing any signs of recovery. People went on more modest vacations this season, or at least I did and stayed close to home. The rest of the world flush with Euros brushed up their English and beat a path to Broadway and the Statue of Liberty and spent their favorable exchange at sidewalk cafés in New York this summer.

Our hands are back in the dishwasher, we're hanging onto the subway grips again jolting from station to station, while the body count in Iraq and Afghanistan that we never talk about exceeds 4000 now.

In the church, in two weeks, Sunday School returns and there'll be a welcome home picnic after worship that day.

The committees have already started meeting. We're slowly getting back into the swing of things in our everyday world.

So it's timely to read today a passage about life in the church, a church in which people come to offer prayer, and to learn more about their faith, and to strengthen their soul and spirit for the trials that life presents to us.

We come to church to hear the music, and to let it heal us. We come for answers to the questions that haunt us in the night, the questions about why we're here, and what we're supposed to be doing, and who are all these other people, and what's the meaning of things anyway, and how does life end, with a bang or with a whimper? We come to church to experience a little of bit of heaven. But all too often, what we experience is something a lot more like earth. That's because the church is only an earthly expression, an earthen vessel of that heavenly place where God is all in all.

This should not be news to you. The church that is portrayed in the New Testament, Paul's churches, the churches in Corinth and Thessalonica and Phillipi, and Rome, for instance, were all churches plagued with earthy, common, everyday problems. Problems of jealousy, and power jockeying. Problems of table etiquette, and what to do about latecomers to the church suppers, and disputes over who baptized what member and whether that baptism is better than some other; problems about whether one should get married when the world is coming to an end so soon or burn with passion. And how should Jews and Gentiles get along together? There were theological disagreements, questions of proper belief. The letter to the Romans is full of that. Professor Paul's longest theological lecture.

In the passage read today from Matthew's gospel we see that Matthew's church needed help with its disputes, guidance about how church members should treat one another, and how to live together as a community of saints and sinners. Tom Long, of Emory University, writing about the passage says,

Matthew has no romantic illusions about the church. He knows that the church is not all sweet thoughts, endlessly patient saints, and cloudless skies. In Matthew's church, people – no matter how committed – are still people, and stormy weather is always a possible forecast. “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love” [we sing]; [but] even so, painful breaks can occur in once tender and loving relationships. “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord”; but greed, lust, and envy can threaten to shake even a strong church off its footing. What happens when the menu at the church includes such unwelcome entries as rage, hatred, and betrayal?¹

I shall never forget the woman in another congregation I served who divorced her husband. It seems he had met another woman, someone younger, and more to his liking. He had been a good father, but now his children had grown and they had left home and in the years that he and his wife had been raising their children, without noticing, their lives had moved apart. He asked her for a divorce.

I don't know all the particulars, but the break up was bitter and for a long time he stayed away from the church while she continued to attend the early service. That's often the way it goes in a divorce. Somebody gets the kids, somebody gets the car, somebody gets the dog, and somebody gets the church. Well, he stayed away for a long time, a couple of years as I remember it, until at last he came and asked me if I would marry him to the woman whom he had come to love and with whom he now wanted to build a new life. I agreed to do the wedding.

It took no time at all for the former wife to hear about his plans. And before I knew it she was in my office to lace me up one side and then down the other.

“You,” she started in, “You, my pastor, would marry that good for nothing man, knowing how much he has hurt me. Knowing how embarrassing that would be for me. How can the church welcome somebody like that in a place where God is supposed to be present. Why the next thing you know he will be sitting with that tramp down on the first row, in plain sight. How can I take communion,” she said, “when they are in front of everyone just flaunting it?”

I don't remember my exact words, there was a bit of hemming and hawing on my part. I know I felt badly for her, because of the awkwardness of the situation, and her embarrassment and anger, but I do remember thinking, “She's at least gotten to the heart of the matter!” How can I commune with someone with whom I do not wish to commune?”

Which of course raises the question, if the church is not a place where forgiveness can be found, then where is that place that forgiveness is found? Maybe the church is like every other place on earth, like the office, for instance, where grudges are held and angers are nursed, or is there something else that is operative in our life together here that

calls us to a higher witness and a different way of being together? This is, after all not just any place.

In the passage today, it's clear that Jesus expects quite a lot from the church and its members. He lines out a process for settling disputes that seems almost too idealistic to be applicable, were it not so specific.

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the whole church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Now this is a higher level of church authority than that to which most of us are accustomed to submitting, although some denominations and congregations have indeed followed this pattern for church discipline and handling conflict.

Someone has said of this approach, that...

...it's most impressive feature is how persistent and time consuming it is. In this process, nobody is written off in haste, no one is fired on the spot, no one slams the door in another's face in rage, to the contrary, a sea of energy is expended in trying, time and again, to make peace. In contrast to the attitudes of the prevailing culture [which teaches us] ("If somebody hassles you, forget them. It's their problem, not yours.") [in the church] relationships are of precious and enduring value ... When a relationship is broken, it is worth going back over and over to work toward reconciliation. [And]... the whole process is focused on the restoration of the offender, not revenge for the offended.²

There comes a time when, if a person, chooses not to resolve the dispute, and would rather not be a part of the church, you cut them loose, you let them go. They should be, Jesus said, as a tax collector or a Gentile to you.

Which is interesting isn't it, because we all know how Jesus treated them. In fact, he was accused of consorting with them, welcoming them into his company, and eating with them. So that even in excommunication there was the desire on Jesus' part for restoration. He just never wrote off anyone.

In the church we are called to build a community of mutual concern and affection, a community whose lives are so interconnected that we weep with one another's weeping and rejoice in one another's rejoicing. How does the old hymn go? "We share each other's woes, each other's burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear."³

Jesus laid upon the church a very high charge. He said, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." In other words, there is a kind of parallel relationship that Jesus calls into being by his

establishment of the church. What is done here has implications in heavenly places. The church is meant to be one of the thin places where just beyond clear sight, and sometimes within it, heaven's light dawns amidst earth's shadows.

We see this all the time in the sacramental and liturgical life of the church. In baptism we know that we are doing something sacred and of eternal weight when water is placed on a person's forehead and the baptismal formula is spoken. And even though parents are a bit like deer in the headlights at that moment and have barely a clue about the real significance of giving their child to the Lord, they know that it is something powerful and good and that they want to have it happen. It is about as close as any of us gets to heaven on earth.

Except, except at the Lord's table where we also see something miraculous happen. Common bread and simple wine become for us the signs and symbols of the feast of the heavenly banquet and a reminder of that Passover meal where Jesus gathered his disciples the night of his arrest.

Water, bread, wine, each remind us that familiar elements when lifted up and set apart become for us more than they were before we spoke of their special meaning; a living reminder of the promises and presence of the Lord. "What you bind on earth," Jesus said, "will be bound in heaven."

And if we understand the connection between heaven and earth in the sacraments, Jesus would remind us that as we live together in the church, we create a community on earth that is something like the community of heaven in spirit and in substance.

We strive to forgive one another in the church, because we have been forgiven in Jesus Christ. And we welcome the stranger because once we were strangers to one another. We weep at one another's weeping and rejoice at one another's rejoicing because we know that we are all members of the same body and if one member suffers we all suffer. If one member is honored we all are honored.

I remember the late Letty Russell, theologian and Yale Divinity School professor who died a year ago July, and who used to say that we cannot wait for the commonwealth of God and its justice to arrive in the sweet by and by. We must begin now to act as if God's reign has already begun, as if heaven is already dawning on earth (which of course it is), and all God's people shall see justice and live in peace (which of course they will), and we will all then be treated with human dignity if we simply begin to live out that truth. We must go ahead and act as if God's commonwealth were already here, she would say, and by acting that way, it will come. It will dawn in our very midst without our realizing, because we will have lived it into being.

My experience of the church is that it is a mixed bag. Heaven knows it's hard enough sometimes just to get Christians in one congregation to act like Christians toward one another. Never mind the denomination trying to do the same. In the local church this group doesn't like that. Somebody's upset with the carpet color in the parlor, somebody else thinks we should use Styrofoam cups rather than china at the coffee hour. Somebody else is incensed that we would add to the world's pollution by stocking Styrofoam. Not that these aren't important, but, well... Sometimes I wonder how Jesus puts up with us.

And yet, Jesus more than puts up with us, Jesus empowers us to be the church, the earthly representation of the commonwealth of God, then asks us to go out and live the part even when we disagree with one another. He even gives us a plan for how to work out those differences. And then he said, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. A lot is riding on this enterprise called the church. We are meant to get it right and not mess it up.

My friend Joanna Adams, pastor of the Morningside Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, told a story at last year’s Covenant Network conference in her home city that captures what I’m suggesting. There is an old legend,

...that when Jesus arrived in heaven after his ascension, he hurried to the throne to report on his adventures on earth. All the angels and archangels gathered around and listened intently. When Jesus got to the part about entrusting the spreading of the Good News to his followers, one of the archangels asked in horror, “Oh my Lord! What if they don’t do it? What if they fail?”

Jesus answered, “I have no other plan.”⁴

We have been given a model for the church and what it is meant to be. Its dimensions and location, its hospitality and spirit, its heart and soul can be found in the measure of the way we live together, frail dust that we are. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,” he said, “and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” This is not just any place, it is the intersection between heaven and earth, and we stand in the midst of it.

So whatever the church is, and whatever it isn’t, is on us. God help us, we’re the best God has. So we had best act the part, and create that kind of community of which Jesus can be proud. Even more, that kind of community in which he can be found. He has no other plan. God help us, indeed.

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¹ Thomas G. Long, **Matthew**. The Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. p. 209.

² Ibid. p. 210.

³ John Fawcett, “Blest be the Tie that Binds”, vs. 3.

⁴ Joanna Adams, “No Other Plan”. Sermon delivered November 3, 2007, Covenant Network Conference, Atlanta, GA.