FIFTHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*The Quality of Mercy* Matthew 18:15-20

In this morning’s passage we heard from the bible, Jesus speaks to us about how we are to live together as a church. However, the values he describes will, of course, have implications far beyond the gathered community. The honesty, courage, and confrontation of hurtful behaviors are values that we can either cultivate to foster the growth of a *Beloved Community* even beyond the walls of this church, or these values can be ignored or bound or withheld which will produce a community wherein suffering is *not* addressed and goes unrelieved. Jesus’ words tell us that harm needs to be addressed and that we must not live in the midst of suffering.

As most commentators will point out, Jesus’ discussion of how to admonish another for hurtful behavior toward one another, comes on the heels of his having expressed his concern for the “little ones”—literally, the children—and after the parable of the lost sheep [10-14], and on his example of how children are to be protected.

He focuses attention on the vulnerability of a child by calling one over and placing it “in the middle” of the disciples [v.2]. He tells them that it would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around one’s neck than to place a “stumbling block” before such a one [v. 6].

The passage that was read for us becomes a way of understanding the meaning of the gesture and the parable. As such, it has both personal and communal implications for us. In both circumstances, we are encouraged to be a community that cares for the vulnerable and mandates righteous behavior toward them. We are also meant to hear and respond to Jesus’ call to bear witness with those who have been harmed, and to our role in accompanying those who are suffering; to support them as they seek justice and healing.

When it comes to interpersonal relationships, it is clear that Jesus recognizes that people living together in community will not always do so in perfect harmony. There are going to be moments when we will disagree, when we will disappoint, when we will hurt one another. Sometimes it will be accidental. Sometimes it will not.

In either case, the one hurt is not to suffer in silence. Neither are we encouraged to be self-righteous. Jesus said: “*Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven* [v. 4].” He says this earlier in the chapter. Even though we are the one injured, we are to approach others with humility and also compassion.

The objective is to help the other person understand your suffering. The hope is—when confronted privately, and in the spirit of understanding and humility—the hurtful one will be inspired to respond with honest recognition and caring for the hurt caused.

Sometimes, this will bring both parties back into fellowship. However, it does not always accomplish this, in which case Jesus recommends bringing others along with you to try again. Interestingly enough, Jesus does not suggest that the others you bring with you are to come and take sides. All we are told is that they are to be there, witnessing the interaction.

If the second meeting does not produce healing, then the whole of the community is called upon. This time, the one hurt is supported by the community as they all come together to bring about reconciliation. All parties are in need of resolution and peace.

The other evening, in our Bible Study, one member suggested that if reconciliation can not be achieved through this process, that it is at this point that the binding and releasing (that Jesus mentions) comes into play.

If the hurtful one repents and apologizes, then all is well. But what do we do if we do not receive an apology?

What was suggested the other evening is that we can carry the hurt and continue to be burdened by it, we may even become embittered by it and continue to suffer. Or we can bind it into the past; sequester it without ignoring it. Rather, we will not let it continue to cause us to suffer.

That was the first time I had thought about such a response, and I believe it has a great deal of merit. To bind something into the past allows us to move forward without carrying the burdens of the past. Such behavior refuses to be defined by the actions of others—especially the hurtful ones. There are all sorts of stories of individuals that have gone forward to achieve great things despite hurtful, even horrendously hurtful events in their earlier lives. We listen to such stories with great admiration and hope.

However, there are also situations where the hurtful behavior is not individual. Hurt and injustice is disseminated among whole categories of people and often mandated throughout generations. Indeed, the hurt that is suffered often rises to the level of the immoral and indeed the criminal. Such crimes may also become institutionalized to the degree that they may even become normalized.

In Jesus’ day, a prophet such as himself who preached peace, justice and fairness, compassion, and love for one another—even our enemies—such a man as he was crucified on Rome’s most effective deterrent, the cross. This was normal.

In our own time, there are a host of injustices that were “normal” for a very long time…until someone stood up and said “no.” More often than not, those who did what Jesus taught and went forward to confront their oppressors were ignored, at the very least.

They may even have been told that their suffering was authorized by tradition, custom, or simply because they did not have the political or financial power to cause change. Much too often, those who were suffering were told that “now was not the time” to right the wrong under which they were living. As if injustice and suffering are sanctionable in any season.

Jesus’ words in this passage, first and foremost, calls us to notice the injustice and suffering that can happen in any community. His teaching also tells us that no matter what the time or circumstance, we are to accompany those who are suffering as they seek a remedy to it.

It is not that we have special insight or authority when dealing with disruptions in community relationships. Rather, our part is to pay attention to the parties involved, especially when there are hurting and vulnerable people. We are to stand beside them. Even more important: we can be the ones who can create “space,” or the conditions for forgiveness and reconciliation to happen between people.

As the Rev. Dr. Audrey West, professor of New Testament at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago has observed:

*[Jesus’] teachings focus the church’s attention on those who face the larger risks, or have the least power and the most to lose, or who find themselves to be in a dangerous or vulnerable situation—often through no fault of their own. The process of truth-telling and accountability enjoined in this passage best takes place with careful attention to the church’s call to protect the disempowered and/or vulnerable ones, walking alongside in solidarity as they speak up about the harm they have experienced.*

I believe Dr. West’s words are especially timely for us as we are at yet another precipice in our life together in this country. In addition to the many fractures in our life together, many people—many children among them—are facing the end of the pandemic funding that helped so many.

I thought about this this past week when I heard about the millions of dollars in federal aid to poor families has ended. Millions of dollars spent on the Women, Infants, and Children—WIC—the program that helped poor mothers purchase healthy food for themselves and their children—much of that money was cut just this past week.

I thought about it when I heard that two years ago, child poverty in this country soared some 40% after the Child Tax Credit ended. And at the end of this month, millions of young people will have to begin paying again on their student loans.

Friends, Jesus’ words and his ministry were addressed to people who were not able to solve their own suffering all by themselves. The quality of his mercy is that he sees all of the suffering throughout the human community, and he has declared that those who suffer shall not do so alone, or in silence. He calls upon us to listen and to learn about who they are, and what they are suffering.

He also calls upon us to also recognize our participation in the suffering we see around us—in the institutions we have not challenged, but also in the casual but hurtful remarks we may have uttered that were racist, or sexist, etc., the way we avert our eyes or change the channel when something unpleasant comes on.

Jesus calls us to notice, and to walk with those who are suffering, and to listen to their stories. Together, with them, we are to go to those places and people who can make meaningful differences in our lives. We are to go to the city councils, to the state legislatures, to congress, and we are to bear witness with them. Let us walk with those who are hungry, houseless, those who need to be supported as we all walk together toward a life of goodness, wholeness, and hope.

I would like to close with one more quote from Dr. West:

*Jesus promises not to desert his disciples as they face that difficult truth and practice living more fully into the communities that God calls into being. After all, he is present wherever two or three are gathered in his name, a name that means “God with us,” who saves people from their sins (Matthew 1:21, 23).*

Today and always, I pray that we hear Jesus’ words and may they transform our hearts and our lives. May we discover the same quality of mercy that Jesus has and may we practice this and offer it to one another. Let it be so. Amen.