

Pentecost 17, Proper 18A
Sept 7, 2008

RCL
Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 149
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

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Today's readings from Holy Scripture are all about God's law. Or perhaps about how God's law has evolved for us throughout biblical history.

In order to bring the people of Israel safely out of captivity, when Pharaoh would not let the people go, God set down the rules, through Moses, about how the Israelites should identify themselves to God, so that God would pass over their houses, and how they should prepare to flee.

Our passage from Exodus this morning lays out the details of how the people were told to prepare a lamb and how it should be eaten and that they should be ready to move at the drop of a hat. This command from God is celebrated centuries later among faithful Jews as the Passover, the observance of God's saving help to his people. We Christians celebrate it too, as a model of God's salvation which we see again in Jesus' giving of himself, becoming the lamb that is sacrificed, to save us, not from the Egyptians, but from our own sinful selves.

Then, in today's gospel, Jesus speaks to his followers about how they are bound in community together by their faith in him and instructs them on how to keep that community together. He tells them – again, in detail – how the law of God applies to living together in community.

If one of your fellow believers offends you, first confront that person and try to work it out. If that has no effect, draw one or two others in and bring them as witnesses.

Involve the church community and do everything you can to be reconciled with the person. In the end that person's understanding of the offense is out of your control. It's entirely up to him or her to seek to be reconciled with you. But it is the responsibility of every member of the Christian community to try everything possible to be reconciled before writing a person off.

This is about the saving help of God too, not something as tangible as putting blood on the doorposts to protect ourselves, but a saving help that tells us how to live in the most productive, the most godly way possible for human beings, to be in community and to value all who are a part of that community.

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” The great advantage of being part of a community of people who follow Christ is that Christ is present with us whenever we gather, whenever even two or three of us gather. And this transforms the whole idea of community. We have his saving help with us, journeying with us, as we face trials and as we celebrate joys, he is always among us.

During the time of transition that All Saints faces now, I hope you will reach out to those you haven't seen here recently. Encourage them. Invite them back. Do what you can to stay in community with each other, knowing that the community of Christ's church is not complete without all its members.

Now, considering our third reading for this morning, I can tell you that an interesting conversation has begun on All Saints' new Online Bible Study. When you go to the website and click on Online Bible Study a screen comes up with a link to the readings for the coming Sunday and then there's a way to add your comment to the blog. Those who have been participating respond to each other so there's a conversation going on.

This week all the comments were about the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. During the week at both of our live Bible studies on Wednesday the same was true. Jesus' command to us that we should "Love your neighbor as yourself," is a compelling one and not always easy to follow. That's what the online conversation has been about.

The apostle Paul is writing to the young church, which has formed at Rome soon after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. In an effort to encourage the church from afar, Paul points out that keeping the 10 commandments, known to be God's law, is only complete when the church members also practice love toward one another.

"Really, all you owe to each other," Paul writes, "is love." The most important thing you can do as members of your church community is to love each other. If you do this, you will not be in a position to break any of the 10 commandments.

Who can love and at the same time murder, or commit adultery, or steal, or desire to have what your brother has, which is to say 'covet.' If you love him you will be glad he has those things you value and you will celebrate his good fortune. To love another person is to fulfill the law of God.

Those writing to the blog this week were quick to point out something we all know from experience, however, and that is that loving others is not the easiest thing to do. Because they know that love is work. Love is, as some have said, a verb. It's no good just to say that you love someone. Love implies actions, what you will do or not do because of that love.

Let me suggest something about loving your neighbor. I think we have to be careful not to confuse loving with avoiding confrontation. To love someone is not always to agree with them. It may be about having the courage to disagree with them.

And to love someone is not about keeping everybody happy. Cheerfulness can cover conflict that ought to be brought out where it can be resolved. It seems to me that those who say they've never had an argument with someone they love may not know that person very well.

I'd like to suggest this definition of love, that love is taking another person seriously. Love is treating the other and his story with respect.

Love is a willingness to listen and consider seriously what she has to say and to take the time to learn about her and why she holds the view she does. It doesn't mean agreeing with her.

Our baptismal vows require us to say a resounding 'yes' to these questions "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons?" and "Will you respect the dignity of every human being?"

In commanding us to love one another, Jesus asks us to look for himself in all people, whether we know them very well or have just met. He asks us to preserve their dignity, to seek to bring out the best in each other instead of assuming the worst.

When we welcome others in this way we follow God's law and we go a long way toward success in loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria