

Sermon, 7 September 2008—Proper 18 & Rally Sunday
Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Today, which is the day we reconstitute the various activities of our parish life, the Church Lectionary has given us three wonderful lessons. In the first, the Passover is instituted. In the second, we hear that we ought to owe each other nothing but love. In the Gospel, we hear advice about how to make life together and love for each other our priority. What lessons could serve us better?

We could think of the first as the importance of our sacramental life. That final meal in Egypt, eaten in such haste that the bread had no time to rise, became the central ritual meal of Judaism. It is the meal Christians transformed and commemorate every Sunday. For both Christians and Jews, it is an event of joy and thanksgiving. What we remember and tell each other over this food is that God has acted on our behalf to free us. In fact, whenever Passover is celebrated, the story of the Exodus from Egypt is not told as a remote event, but as something that happened to “me,” to “us,” who are seated around this table, tasting the bitter herbs and the unleavened bread: God freed *me* from bondage. Also, as we heard in the lesson, no one is to be left out. If one household is too small for such a meal, it is to join in with its neighbors. Everyone is to be able to celebrate liberation together.

So these are our first two hints about our life here at St. John’s. What we do each Sunday morning is to give thanks that *we* have been brought out of bondage. We are to gather together to acknowledge that we are no longer caught up in the fear of death, in the evasions of shame, in the obsessions of sin. As time went by, the Jewish Passover developed four questions which were assigned to the children to ask. The first is “why is this night different

from all other nights?” Then the child was told “because on this night, God brought us out of Egypt.” So *my first charge* to you this morning, as you are present on the Sunday we rally back together, is that *you ask yourself a version of that question every Sunday: “why is this day different from all other days?”* What is it that is worth remembering and celebrating and giving thanks for on Sunday? If you don’t know the answer to that question, keep coming back. My dear friends, if there is nothing to commemorate with gratitude on Sunday, why are you here?

The second hint has to do with Moses’ instructions that small households are to combine, so that the feast can be ample and abundant for everyone. No one is to be left uninvited; no one is to hesitate over a felt inability to offer the feast. If you do not have enough on your own, the feast must take precedence over your pride and fear. Join with others. So this is *my second charge* to you this morning: *enlarge your joy and ours as well by inviting your neighbor to give thanks with you.* There will be more to give thanks for when we give thanks together. The math of the Reign of God knows only addition and multiplication: God’s will is that God’s children increase one to another and one by another. God does not operate by subtraction and division, let alone omission; we are the ones who opt for that. If Sunday is a day of celebration and gratitude, why would you not want your friends, and even strangers whose joys you can come to learn, here with you?

Our dear older brother Paul writes to remind us that our tendency is to complicate all this into a series of obligations—a long list of how to be good, which we scan with pursed lips and a frown—but the truth is that we owe nothing to anyone except to love one another. At the same time, we know how easy it is for a self-referential version of love to arise, one in

which I am busy doing for you what I think you ought to have done, maybe even what I think you ought to be doing, certainly what I think you ought to be grateful for. In this version of love the only person I check in with is myself—an endless “how am I doing? can you hear me now? am I loving you yet?” We already know how much damage is done that way and what a wearisome burden it is to try to love that way. Truly to love our neighbor as our self is a tough discipline. Do we know enough about our neighbor to love them as they would like to be loved?

Paul knows enough to follow up his injunction to love with this: “you know what time it is; it is the moment for you to wake from sleep.” What is burdensome and irritating and impossible when we are not paying attention becomes a source of wonder and even of joy and thanksgiving when we are discovering the other person at the same time. So *my third charge* to you today is *to look around, to notice the person you do not know, and to do what you can to find out how you might be of service to them*. I have said it before and I must say it again. The sure way to leave Church resentful is to arrive wanting to be inspired and encouraged and comforted. The sure way to leave Church cheerful and peaceful and grateful is to arrive looking for a way to be of service.

Finally, we have Matthew’s advice about community. If someone sins against you, speak to them in private. How wise this is! Many of us offend and hurt each other with no idea we have done it, usually not intending any hurt at all—but the wound is inflicted! And then, many of us first react by licking our wounds in isolation until we have slobbered them into a throbbing infection, with a self-pity temperature of 106—or else we rush to speak, not to the person who has hurt us, but to someone else: “can you believe? I just don’t understand!” Going in private to the person who

caused you to stumble is much harder, but it is much cleaner. And what is even more important, it shows that you trust them; it shows that, even if they acted deliberately and cruelly, you expect them to share with you larger values of mutual care and intentional life together—which their selfishness actually depends on—and so you expect to find them to be eager to repair the harm done for the sake of a larger life you depend on. Your direct address to the other person shows that you want that relationship to work, and so you invest in it.

This is why, if the one-on-one conversation fails, the circle is enlarged—not to gang up on the person, but because the life of the Church belongs to the Church. When one member is at risk, all are at risk, because something in the corporate body is failing: some grief left without comfort, some disease left without healing, some shame left without confession, some hope left without aspiration and air. The two or three witnesses who confirm the words are there to confirm all words, even the Jesus' many words of warning and consolation. The congregation is brought in so that every resource can be brought to bear that can make for reconciliation.

Notice that Matthew considers the flaw to be the inability to listen. The one who has given another the wound “refuses to listen.” What this tells us is that Matthew considers the essential ingredient for community, not the ability to speak, but the ability to listen, to hear, to take in what is being said. In this particular person, that ability is broken; he or she cannot hear. He or she is unable to receive an account of reality that differs from the one he or she declaims and enacts; nothing enters them; nothing alters them. At that point, their change in status is not punishment, but simple recognition. They are not expelled from the common life, but seen to be already outside it because deaf to it. How can they be part of what they cannot hear?

So Matthew says, “Treat them as a Gentile or a tax collector,” that is, as an outsider, a predator, one who lives to subject you, to oppress you, to drain you. Treat the one that cannot hear you as a danger to you. Of course, the wonderful embedded joke here is that Jesus ate with tax collectors and healed Gentiles. To see the person as an outsider turns the person into the beloved stranger whom we are called to spend time with, breaking bread, telling stories, healing, seducing them back into a right relationship with God, as Jesus, the master seducer, did. The love of the wounded person for the person who refuses to listen does not stop. The only thing that has stopped is the assurance that the two hold in common a set of values, an intention, a purpose, and a delight. What the tax collector wants—who collaborates with the Roman imperial system, who identifies with the Gentile oppressors, and who lives off the excess that can be extorted beyond what is lawfully due—and what the Torah observant Jewish Christians of Matthew’s congregation want—who forsake family and livelihood to follow and proclaim a crucified Messiah—cannot be the same thing. All the more reason to go out solicitously and tenderly to seek a lost sheep, as Jesus did.

The poignancy of this passage is lost to us in this translation. The phrase “another member of the Church” does not appear in the original Greek; the Greek uses the word “*ho adelphos sou*,” which means “your brother.” What is lost when someone leaves is not a name in the Church registry; what is lost to you is flesh of your flesh, heart of your heart, another of your own self, brought into this world as you were, and irreplaceable. Of course you would first go to that person alone, who is another one of you! Of course you would call up every resource to secure their place at the table! And of course it is harrowing, when all that fails, and it is painful then to look at that person as a stranger, a predator, a leech, one you cannot love

freely any more, but must love with caution and with no expectation of return. The loss is real and deep.

So *my final charge* to you on this Sunday when we consider again how we want to be involved with each other, to support each other, to listen to each other, and to love each other in this place is this: *make St. John's your priority*. The gentle process Matthew describes of calling out to each other and weaving the strands of common life together can only take place when the members of the Church recognize each other as brothers and sisters and place that relationship first. To be someone's sister or brother is not a voluntary optional chosen relationship—though the nurture of each other must be. To acknowledge someone as brother or sister is to find ourselves given to each other irrevocably, shaping each other by our actions and affections so that anyone could recognize the family relationship. Even in families, as we know, there can be those who “refuse to listen.” But in every family there are those who seek each other out and who cultivate, not only reconciliation, but mutual flourishing, so that all are brought as close as possible to their perfection. This nurture, Matthew says, is the Church.

Be that here.

Of course, Rally Sunday is an opportunity to look in the mirror, to see reflected our areas of ministry and each other. This is done so we can see who we are and so that each of us can consider what our share might be, what ministry calls out to us. In addition, you will be invited to a chili supper with the Vestry. The Vestry has spent several months reflecting on the dimensions of our life together here. Some affirmations of basic beliefs have arisen out of that and some commitments have been made on the basis of those beliefs. They want to share these convictions with you over supper and invite to participate in them. These evenings promise to be wonderful

opportunities to speak to each other about what matters most. I hope all of you will look forward to them as much as I do. They are hardly suppers, but sampler sessions of the glorious and endless banquet of God, to which all are invited, and which we hope to share with all the saints, when we enter into the enduring praise of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, one God, whom we praise today.