RECONCILIATION

September 6, 2020

"Where two or three are gathered in my Name, there am I in the midst."

Matt 18:20

This Gospel today is about the Gospel of the Real Presence – which, as it turns out, is not just some mystical, magical ethereal event, but also moment when flesh and blood sit together and hash out enormous differences and finally reach understanding – even agreement. The instructions for experiencing the Real Presence are that we go to any length to mend the divisions in our communities. Set between the Parable of the Lost Sheep (which Jesus will seek until found) and the instructions to Peter that forgiveness needs to be available 77 times rather than the rather easy 7 times, Matthew tells us that unless and until we find ways to solve our great divisions, we cannot experience the Presence of Christ among us. As long as we allow great ruptures to mar our communities, we will not experience the peace of God that passes human understanding. These differences, these wounds that infect our relationships between races, between political parties, between left and right and center, between young and old, rich and poor – these divisions will continue to infect us all until we find ways to speak peaceably to one another and begin to treat every single person as the beautiful handwork of a loving God.

We are broken hearted by the state of our American nation. We find ourselves alternately angry, sad, depressed, frustrated, occasionally hopeful and usually some mixture of it all. We are all wounded by our inability to love all our neighbors rather than only those who happen to agree with our opinions. Many of us are having a difficult time even listening to another point of view. And that would

be the root of what both Jesus and Matthew refer to as our sin. The unwillingness to give any credence to those who see the world from an entirely different perspective than our own makes it impossible for us to begin to bridge the gap that seems to widen daily in the press, in our streets, and across our nation.

Matthew seems almost desperate that his readers in 2nd century Palestine get the message. The church at that time was under duress from the political power of Rome. Non-Romans living under some guise of Roman law were often poorly treated. Christians, (and Christians, by definition, had no legal standing), were the targets of harassment and worse. Even a simple argument with a neighbor might elevate into a whispered accusation to a local governor – followed by a quick arrest and a round or two in the Roman arena. Fortunately for us, those early Christians were willing to reach out to their neighbors with love and friendship.

Perhaps we will find a way to bury our differences in American culture, but it doesn't seem likely. And if that is all we do, our differences will continue to fester - to be an open wounds to the world. We will continue to suffer separation, self-righteousness, and disdain for others until we take Matthew's call for reconciliation seriously.

This Gospel is set in a chapter focused on Christian treatment of the most vulnerable in society. But the truth is that we are all vulnerable, and we are made so by our separation from each other – neighbors both near and far. We have built walls called race and class and ideology and politics that fracture our spirits. We need to go to whatever lengths necessary to change the adversarial positions in which we find ourselves and begin the mending, healing process that will allow our communities to thrive.

The promise of this Gospel sounds extravagant: that where two or three gather in the Name of Christ, he will be present. That whatever we ask with a united voice, God will grant. It sounds extreme. But think of a moment when you have reconciled some long-standing dispute, and you will remember the great peace that comes with re-establishing that relationship. It is most dramatic when we reconcile with a spouse or a child, but when we acknowledge a new relationship in the larger community, as with the cessation of wars and the acceptance of peace accords, welcoming a new family to the neighborhood, reaching across long standing social barriers of race or caste or creed – the whole world breathes a sigh, and Christ comes to walk among us more closely.

When we are able to bring our own biases to the table and reach out to those whose views are widely different; when we can sit together and work diligently for understanding and mutual respect; when we find even small ways in which honor those whose desires conflict with our own; when we sorrow at our loss and still are able to celebrate something new, then Christ is present in our struggle: he will calm our souls, and we will know more deeply the peace of God which comes from experiencing God's real and abiding presence. Christians have a mandate to take up such a ministry of reconciliation—to help heal this country. For in the Christian tradition, truth is ultimately a person, the one who is "the way and the truth and the life." Truth, therefore, is someone encountered in love, not something wielded as a weapon. No opinion, however passionately held, can ultimately be called truthful if it isn't spoken in charity. That is precisely what St. Paul meant when he wrote: "Though I speak in the tongues of angels, but have not love, I am a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."

A former colleague of mine in the Diocese of Missouri (45 years ago!) has recently written a piece in the Wall Street Journal calling for the church to take the lead in working to resolve the great divide in our national conversation. Former Senator and Episcopal priest John Danforth writes this: "Christians have a

mandate to take up a ministry of reconciliation – to help heal the country. For in the Christian tradition, truth is ultimately a person, the "one who is the way, the truth, and the life." Truth, therefore, is someone encountered in love, not something wielded as a weapon. No opinion, however passionately held, can ultimately be called truthful if it isn't spoken in charity. That is exactly what St Paul meant when he wrote, "Though I speak in the tongues of angels, but have not love, I am a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."

For Christians to embark consciously on a ministry of reconciliation would be a profound gift to America. This would be an ambitious ministry requiring dedication, imagination, persistence and interfaith coordination. But with prayer and imagination, we can find countless ways in countless situations to exchange the peace.

It is essential that people of faith take responsibility for healing the divisions caused by polarization, and that we bear witness to the solution and not add to the problem. Americans generally, and Christians specifically, have a duty to act civilly, to will the good of others—or, in Christian terms, to bear witness to that divine love that knows no borders; to the God for whom love, mercy and justice are the only standards of human action." Houses of Worship, The Wall Street Journal. Rev John C Danforth and Fr Matt Malone.

Finally, remember what St Paul wrote to the church at Rome:

9 " Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. **10** Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. **11** Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. **12** Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. **13** Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. **15** Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. **16** Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.[a] Do not be conceited.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. **18** If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."