

Pentecost 18
4/09/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 12:1- 14

Psalm 95

Romans 13:8 - 14

Matthew 18:15 - 20

The importance of regulations!

Sermon preached by Rev. Morag Logan

For most of my time in ministry, it has felt that one constant mantra in ministry, and in teaching about the biblical texts, is the repeated refrain: the Bible is not a rule book. Today, I am going to step out of that character – as we reflect on some important regulations, rules, which we read in the lectionary passages today.

Two of our passages today set out rules: the Exodus passage that we read sets out regulations for the preparations and celebration of the Passover meal; the Matthew passage sets out rules for dealing with conflict within the community, when something wrong, something harmful, and there is injury and grievance within the Christian community as a result. Neither are very comfortable sets of rules and situations, both have vitally important points to make.

First of all, this Matthew passage outlines a process for dealing with community conflict, set out by Jesus. The existence of such a passage is itself witness to the unfortunate fact that conflict has always been within the Christian community, that people sin against each other within the community, and this gospel, one of the church's early documents – sets out a process for dealing with it. It is an important reminder that ALL communities need to form rules like this. In the very best of circumstances, without deliberate wrong or harm being done, conflict arises within communities, from clashes between personalities, from misunderstandings. It is also true that we do not, and will not ever live in the very best of circumstances! We are all frail creatures, flawed and capable of doing great wrong as well as great good. Given this frailty, and the inevitability of conflict and strife, every human community needs to formulate rules like this, if only because it is much better to do your thinking about conflict and its management in a calmer, low conflict setting.

Secondly though, looking at these rules set out by Jesus in this passage, we see a number of very good principles set out here, principles that would hold anywhere:

- When it comes to conflict, you don't let things lie. Conflict, especially deep conflict between individuals needs to be addressed, aired – and hopefully in this way resolved. Conflict will not just go away, left unaddressed, it is likely to fester and affect all relationships within a group, spreading out to influence all issues where the parties in conflict are involved.
- You don't talk to everyone about the problem as your first move! You don't start a round of gossip and rumour and get the whole community talking, but you try to address the issue with the individual alone first.

- The goal here is to resolve the conflict, bringing people back into relationship, not losing anyone to the community. Healing, not winning, not being right, not vindication, not revenge or vengeance, but change in the one doing wrong, and acceptance by the wronged, healing the relationship.
- This is a staged approach, if the one-on-one approach does not resolve the issue, the individual is not abandoned to work it out on their own, but invited to continue to work on the matter, with another person involved, then with involvement of the whole community. Only after this process has failed does the matter result in more serious action – of expulsion and exclusion, and that seems to be the final step envisaged. To be treated as a gentile and a tax-collector was, in general parlance, to be treated as an outsider, to be placed outside the bounds of the community.

In reflecting on this passage today, it is important to me we also add our own caveats. I believe that this passage sets out a way of dealing with conflict that is internal, that starts as some harm done to one individual by another, or a dispute between two individuals. The process outlined is useful for matters of dispute and disagreement, in a whole range of different contexts. The passage, I believe does not specify for the Christian world a method which must be used for working with all conflict and harm done within the community. There are circumstances where this process cannot be applied. We can easily imagine circumstances where the wrong done means that it is not safe for a person to try to deal with the matter one-on-one, for example. And just as important, this passage does not give us, the Christian community, any grounds to feel that when it comes to disputes and problems, harms and wrongs involving the community, that we should deal with any and all conflicts strictly as internal matters. Such regulation of the life of the Christian community does not allow us, or give us any grounds to try to step outside the legal system. We remain, and except in extraordinary circumstances, we should remain a part of our legal system, with its own limits and sanctions. This process described in Matthew gives a different sort of standard than the legal one, and a very useful one for many types of communities, but I believe it does not set out separate us from our legal system, or allow grounds to try to do so.

However, however true, pastoral, and useful these rules are, I don't think that we are here this morning to reflect in general on useful rules for social groups. I have already said that the church is not outside the law. It is also true that the church of Jesus Christ is not a social club, although it sustains profound social relations. The church of Jesus Christ is not a therapeutic community, although healing can and does happen within it. The church of Jesus Christ gathers in his name and with his presence. What happens within the church matters. It is of ultimate importance because, as the passage concludes: "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." For us, the Christian church, that is the reason that conflicts, hurts, pains, wrongs must be examined, discussed and addressed and healing prayed for. Not because the church is ours, our particular club that we care about even if it is made up of frail individuals with all too human tendencies to squabble and act badly, but because it belongs to Christ, his presence, his spirit, is with us.

This presence changes everything. It changes the significance of what might just be read as good advice for group management: what we do within the church is of more importance than ourselves and our feelings, it is our participation in the kingdom of God, we are acting in the presence of Christ. However puzzling this may make us to the rest of the world, this is the standard to which we hold ourselves, this is the importance of what we do, how we treat each other.

It changes, finally, the meaning within the passage. The final step in this multi-staged approach, the final failure, as it were, is that the community is to treat the individual "as a gentile and a tax collector." Now, yes, in one sense, treating someone "as a gentile and a tax collector" means rejection, exclusion, excommunication. However, when read in the presence of Christ, in the context of Matthew's Gospel, the meaning here may become quite other. Matthew's gospel also tells of the tax collectors who dine with Jesus. The gospel itself culminates in a commission to preach to "all nations," drawing the gentiles into the ambit of this community. This final exclusion develops quite another sense. Quite ironically, treating a person as a "gentile and a tax collector" means continually offering the same welcome that Christ offered. Christ came to call and to welcome sinners and tax-collectors and gentiles, and we are bound and called to follow him. All are called to the communion of love, within or without the community of faith. The table around which we all gather today, the Eucharist is our sign of that communion of love which is open to all, and offered to all.
