



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 18 (A)

Reconciliation

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

In our Gospel reading, we have a fruitful pairing. In one moment, Jesus is giving advice to his disciples, and by extension, the larger church about reconciling with one another. We might even be tempted to call it a church policy of sorts – or one of those “how-to guides” or “top three ways to improve your work culture.” But then, after this mini-policy, Jesus offer us words of spiritual importance, concluding with this famous consolation: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

The mundane and the mystical exist side-by-side in scripture and both are essential to our discipleship and flourishing.

In our text, Jesus quite literally gives us step-by-step instructions for what to do if a member of the church sins against you. You are the aggrieved, in this scenario, and you are called to go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. The rest of Jesus’ church policy concerns what would happen if the first step didn’t work. If the person who hurt you doesn’t listen to you, more people need to be involved, and if that doesn’t work, the church needs to be told, and if that doesn’t work, consider them like a Gentile and a tax collector (which, you have to wonder: Does that mean considering them a beloved child of God?)

Now, much ink has been spilled about whether Jesus’ church reconciliation policy actually works or not. Doesn’t it place the aggrieved in a difficult spot? Isn’t telling the whole church a little extreme? Perhaps a copy-and-paste approach from the first century to our century is not the ideal interpretation for this scripture text. The church has long wrestled with how to reconcile its various members, choosing many and diverse approaches, some recommended and some definitively not recommended! Nevertheless, there is no reason to dismiss Jesus’ words; there are strong currents under this text that are essential for our movement back toward one another and our movement toward Christ.

First, go to them. Yikes! Scary! What it does not say: Go to two or three or twelve of your closest friends. It says to go to the person who wronged you. We should start praying for courage now.

Second, it says: Tell them about the fault. You can't assume that they already know and that they were simply expecting you to walk up at any moment to confront them. They might not know, in fact, and so you both need to get on the same page.

Third: Eventually, the church needs to be involved if the conflict continues. A prolonged disagreement between various members of a community is like a wound that festers; in other words, it affects the whole body, it hurts the whole body, it takes a toll on the whole body.

This Gospel text points to our mundane actions as disciples. Not mundane in that this word from Jesus is "lacking interest or excitement." Rather, Jesus' church policy on reconciliation is mundane in that it speaks to our earthly duties, our worldly existence, our ordinary discipleship.

Most of us spend our lives in the mundane, going about our earthly duties as best we can. We go to our workplaces where we create our own policies to improve efficiency and culture. We write emails, we answer phone calls, we do our laundry, we vacuum and put dishes away, we grocery shop, we chop onions, we file our tax returns, we help our children with their homework, we plant gardens, we get into arguments with our neighbors, we take care of aging parents, we have tests done and wait for online portals to reveal our futures, we worry about our bank accounts, we lift weights, we do a load of laundry, we break up with lovers, we plan weddings, we muster up some courage and tell someone they've hurt us.

Jesus cares about the mundane sphere, the earthly duties we enact and bear. It's the stuff our lives are made of. It's why he gives us these instructions about reconciling with one another, that we might live with one another more peaceably than before. He knows we need help living out our daily existence, our communal existence. He knows that his instructions have to make sense to embodied people who often misunderstand each other and have no idea that we hurt each other to begin with.

The key to embracing the mundane is seeing its inherent importance, its mystical ramifications, its spiritual center. As Kathleen Norris writes in *Quotidian Mysteries*,

"The Bible is full of evidence that God's attention is indeed fixed on the little things. But this is not because God is a great cosmic cop, eager to catch us in minor transgressions, but simply because God loves us--loves us so much that the divine presence is revealed even in the meaningless workings of daily life. It is in the ordinary, the here-and-now, that God asks us to recognize that the creation is indeed refreshed like dew-laden grass that is 'renewed in the morning' or to put it in more personal and also theological terms, 'our inner nature is being renewed every day.'"

Jesus wants us to notice how the mundane is inherently tied to the mystical. He longs for us to see how the human and the divine collide, the earthly and the heavenly kiss. Meaning: He hopes that we might notice how he, Jesus himself, is among us, even as we chop veggies and fill out diocesan forms and follow up on emails. He wants us to notice how he is especially with us in the smallest gathering of the church, where two or three members of Christ come together.

Jesus gives the people this mundane church policy so that they continue to gather together in his name. Our reconciliation serves a greater purpose; it will help us to learn to stand one another long enough that we might recognize Christ in one another's faces. We are given this earthly instruction so that we might continue to worship the God-man in spirit and in truth. We are given this work so that we don't give up on each other, and thus, give up on the body of Christ.

Whenever you are doing some chore, whenever you are doing some mundane or earthly work that feels useless or bothersome or even scary, can you try to see God in your midst? Whenever you are annoyed at the banal bureaucracies of an institutional church, bogged down by all sorts of minutiae, can you uncover how the Spirit is moving and breathing and leading you all, God's people? Whenever two or three of you are gathered, wounded and beloved, can you hold onto the truth that Christ is truly there with you?

In the person of Jesus, heaven and earth dwell. Humanity and divinity meet. And thus, our mundane, earthly lives are graced with the fullness of God's presence, a presence and power and perfect Trinity who is reconciling all things to one another and to God's very self.

***The Rev. Kellan Day** is the Assistant Rector at Church of the Incarnation in Highlands, North Carolina. She is a graduate of The School of Theology at the University of the South. Kellan and her spouse, Kai, relish time outside – climbing, hiking with their dog, and sitting on porches with friends.*