



Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost *Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe*



Sunday 6 September 2020

READINGS

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

Where two or more are gathered in my name

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” I hope that during this time of physical separation, you have experienced the truth of Jesus’ words in new ways. Firstly, the power of the two or three. There in your home, with a family member or two, you ARE the church. Numbers or size are not what makes a church impressive. It is Christ who brings us together and in our gathering, no matter how small, we bring Christ to one another.

We have also discovered a new understanding of what it means to *gather* in Christ’s name. Whether you watch the online service from Australia, South Africa or Argentina, whether on Sunday, Monday or Wednesday, your participation in this service is real. Of course. this is not a spiritual mystery, it’s technology, but it’s allowed us to gain some insight into the mysterious reality of God’s kingdom. In a time before the internet, who would have foreseen that the church could gather, connect and unite in a community that transcends time and place? Except isn’t that exactly a definition of the church?

Christians have always been a virtual community; citizens of the unseen kingdom of heaven. Through Jesus we were already connected to a reality that is independent of time and space. And when we gather, Jesus is with us.

Today our gospel reading addresses conflict within a community. We can’t avoid the fact that when two or three are gathered, there are also two or three different opinions, motives, actions and reactions. People are imperfect. We sin and are sinned against. Matthew presents this to us as a given – conflict and sin are unavoidable. This gospel passage makes us ask, “What is God’s vision for responding to the imperfections of others and our own imperfections?”

Rather than focusing on the specific steps provided in the passage, let’s look at the overall intention. Jesus provided guidelines for an ordered, harmonious community. One that values relationships and always seeks reconciliation and restoration through repentance.

We are advised to act in a way that is measured, that requires honesty and vulnerability and that holds each of us accountable. It starts privately and in person. Often when we approach someone to talk about how they have sinned against us, we might learn how we too were at fault. What I find remarkable is this passage's commitment to a person's willingness and ability to change. The offender is given numerous opportunities to reconcile. Although a three-stage process is described, in the passage directly following this one Jesus tells Peter that forgiveness should be offered not just seven times but seventy times seven. In other words: abundantly.

This isn't so much a passage about when to "kick someone out of community" and write them off, as it is about holding space for someone's heart to change. About not allowing someone to write themselves off. Community takes commitment.

It can't go unsaid that this passage has been misused. It has been used incorrectly to justify publicly shaming those called "sinners" based on the authority of church leaders. It has also been misused to excuse churches that cover up crimes including abuse.

All communities exist in a social context with laws and consequences. We are *not* told to protect wrongdoers at the expense of their victims. We are, however, challenged to accompany our brother or sister on their road to restoration, journeying with them as they face the consequences of sin and the necessity of restitution, even if it leads to a prison sentence.

While we as a community of love and hope uphold a vision of harmony and unity, we know that doesn't happen easily. Repentance and restoration don't come cheaply. Our country's beautiful but imperfect Truth and Reconciliation Commission taught us that. It provided a necessary and often miraculous space for truth-telling and healing. On the other hand, when it comes to social justice and equality in South Africa, the evidence says it failed. I think the TRC saved us in ways we may never know but it was not enough to leave it there. Repentance requires a change of heart. We haven't got there yet and without it, reconciliation is incomplete.

We, the body of Christ, must not grow tired or give up. Jesus established a community of relationships. We have a ministry of confession, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. The kingdom we belong to, God's kingdom, is all about changing hearts and the agreement of two or three can transform the world.