

Sermon September 6, 2020  
"Love Between the Us and Them"  
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Grace and Peace to You in the name of God Our Loving Creator and Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Well appropriately this morning our gospel tells us that wherever two or three are gathered in Christ's name he is here with us. With the rain and wet wind this morning we are taping this service with our bare bones crew of three and we are grateful to all who are joining us online probably from a more dry space!

Today Jesus and the Apostle remind us that loving relationship is at the center of the church. But that it does not come easily to us!

When our Romans text lists the commandments and then says that they are "summed up" in the word for us "Love your neighbor as yourself". Many of us would much prefer the details and listed rules of behavior. What you can and can't do as the commandments of Moses offer. What do you think is it simpler to follow written rules or interpret action through the lens of loving your neighbor? Sometimes the thing that seems simple can be more complicated than it seems.

Loving your neighbor sounds good, but loving your neighbor can mean different things to different people in different circumstances. It is relational not about hard facts and how to's. And for those of you familiar with the use of Love Languages as a relational tool know that the trick with love is that

sometimes the love that is given or offered isn't understood by the person receiving it the same way it is intended. When we love as we want to be loved, it may not feel loving to the other person who doesn't understand things in the same way. How do you find out what the other person wants and experiences? You talk! But this can sometimes seem like a revolutionary and countercultural approach!

When Jesus in Matthew offers a structured way to bring up people feeling wronged in the community, it seems like a method we rule followers can get behind, but it also leaves a lot open to interpretation. I've spent a lot of time in intentional Christians communities and this way of resolving problems can also make problems worse, when people with long lists of wrongs unleash them on a community that is trying to be good listeners.

Like all cure alls for conflict, this method is not perfect and can be manipulated... Like people not having the same view of facts, and maybe having imagined wrongs. I think the hope is that through talking the truth will come to light. One of the things I've heard said about the passage in Matthew is that wherever two or three are gathered, there will be a conflict! That may not be the reality we want but when we recognize that it is part of our human experience in community, we are more willing to trust Jesus to help us listen to each other and work through our differences.

The original intent of this passage is set within the care for those on the margins in the community that may not be heard without this help and support and another person to help them be heard. Immediately preceding this passage in Matthew is the story of the sheep and how Jesus is the shepherd who cares for the one sheep in need and leaves the 99. But this passage shows the role of

the 99 in supporting that sheep. In some ways this is because we are to be Jesus for that person most in need. But Jesus also says “I will be there with you” when you confront one another as well as when we gather in prayer and praise.

In our current divisive climate in our country many church members may have given up on this way of addressing people's feelings of being wronged. And in the larger society there are people bringing their complaints and assuming they will not be listened to. And there is a large population of people that is offended... by others being offended. So how do you apply this to those real-world circumstances?

I actually think at the heart of these calls to focus on love and relationships reveals a way of dealing with conflict that we need right now. Matthew reminds us Jesus isn't automatically on our side in conflicts as we often assume but is with us and those who we are in conflict with. It shifts the level of care for the other and the rhetoric that can easily separate us from others instead of bringing us together to face tough issues with Jesus' help and presence.

Romans is a call for us to transform our minds, with love at the center. Instead of seeing rules and the need for rules... what does it look like to see our neighbors as God's children and give them love and respect through that, even when, and maybe especially when, we disagree with them?

These texts seem to recognize how easy it is to fill up our minds with things other than love when we see our neighbors. Especially during election years, campaigns can feed enemy images of people that believe things different than us or have different life and cultural experiences. The pull of “us vs. them”

thinking in human hearts and minds heats up to a boiling point during election years. And even outside of that, it's obvious people are so hungry for a connection to a new truth and something bigger than themselves—often to make sense of the wrongs they see in the world—they are willing to believe the craziest conspiracy theories, like Q-anon which allows followers to dehumanize many politicians and government workers in secret attacks. Rather than bring these ideas into the open or address them the way Matthew calls for they can fester and grow in secret. That can be dangerous.

It's easy to create lists of wrongs when we aren't forced to talk and try to resolve them. They can build up into a wall between you and your neighbor. In Bible study last week, we talked about how hard it is to forgive other people. How we can hold onto the hurt and resentment and it can control us to the point where we are the ones who need to be freed from it.

When people here at First, say they don't want to talk about politics, I think some of that is not wanting to divide the community into an "us vs. them". I definitely understand that and Jesus isn't calling for that either. Jesus is saying that in order to love one another, we need to listen to each other and understand others' needs through the lens of love.

The way of meeting described in Matthew, may not work in every situation, but at the heart is a call to humanize the other person and to see them as connected to something bigger than themselves that is not some secret society, but a way of being and seeing with love at its center. A way of being that can orient toward someone different than you and hear their side of the story.

On the weekly synod call with pastors this week, we heard from someone who is connected to the Braver Angels group that is trying to help people fight the divisiveness around us and stay connected to our neighbors when the world tries to split us up into us and them.

Church can be a place for connection too, that allows us to listen and hear each other. That reminds us that Jesus and the Apostle Paul call on the church to see people through a lens of love, when they are together and when they address a wrong. We don't just apply that here at church but learn how to do it in the world and online as well!

Being in a church means knowing that we need help and healing and knowing that God sees us through that lens of love. And Jesus always leads us deeper into love for others even when it is not the easy answer. Even when it is hard for us and we'd rather point the finger and blame others. But when Jesus is gathered with us, it is all of Jesus and it is all of us, our sins and our wrongs. The Jesus with us is the Jesus that died for our sins and freed us from what holds us captive. With that person in the room, what grudge or sin is can have power over us? What can't be overcome? We are challenged to meet and listen to others, and it is not always easy to live and lead with love and forgiveness, but we do have the promise that Jesus shows up when we do!

May the peace that passes all understanding keep your heart and mind in Christ Jesus our Lord.