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Sept. 6, 2020- 14th Sun After Pentecost (Proper 18A)  
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Exodus 12.1-14; Psalm 149; 13:8-14 ; Matt 18.15-20

**“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” †**

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The world can be a very frightening and even dangerous place! We only have to look at the events of the past few weeks to see this— rioting and violent protests across America, the continuing surge of COVID 19 in our communities, and worldwide violence. Yet, in today's Gospel, Jesus clearly tells us that we are not alone! Wherever “two or three are gathered... I am there.”

When I initially read this Gospel earlier in the week, I kept focusing on what seemed like the authority of the Church— when Jesus says, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”— and was afraid I was going to have to preach about that. After further reflection, I came to realize that this Gospel is not about authority and punishment, it's a call for reconciliation within our community! Today's scriptures remind us of the important balance between rules and love. The Gospel discusses ‘conflict resolution’ and how to handle anyone who is at fault in our community. The clear message is that we must work hard to resolve conflicts among ourselves; not to hide from them, nor avoid them in fear. That's so fitting during our present time.

Matthew's Gospel is unique among the 4 canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) in that it refers to the *Ecclesia* by name, that is the Greek word that means “the gathering or the assembly” ... a word that came to refer to “the Church,” the gathered people of God... *Ecclesia*. This Gospel was written for a particular church community, who gathered under the teachings of its author, and it says a lot about how members of that church sought to live their faith in the Risen Lord within their community. In it, Jesus stresses that bad feelings between two persons must be worked out personally, one-on-one between the two who are directly involved— “point out the fault when the two of you are alone”— there's no need for anyone else to get involved, unless one of them refuses to cooperate, its then that a third person might be needed. When we hear this passage, we often miss that part.

If someone is upset with me or hurt by something I do, Jesus says they should come directly to me, in person... not talk to the Senior Warden, or to a member of the Altar guild, or to Stephen, or to another member of the parish. And by these same standards, if I am upset with someone, I need to spend time to reflect on why I'm so upset, and then I need to find the courage to confront that person directly, and not through someone else.

[As an aside... in psychology, that action of bringing a third party into a personal dispute is called “triangulation,” and often it's evidence of sickness and dysfunction within a family or close community. It's dangerous, because it contributes to gossip,

and because it prevents true reconciliation and resolution of conflict within a community.... It's also a big subject, meant for another sermon.]

The point is, if I hurt someone or make a mistake, the individual I've hurt should come directly to me, so that I may have the opportunity

- (1) to apologize and seek their forgiveness, and explain my position,
- (2) to work with them to mutually straighten out the problem and,
- (3) hopefully, to receive their forgiveness.

Only then can we move on as members of the true Body of Christ!

With this in mind, consider the passage from Romans. Here Paul outlines the qualities that ought to be at the heart of our community and the basis of our individual lives. Notice that they are all based on "genuine love." *Genuine Love*... this phrase is a remarkable change in Paul's writing. Up to this point in the letter, he has been speaking of "God's love," *agape*, and now he speaks of '*agape anypokritos*'... 'Sincere... Genuine love.' It's love that is distinctive of true believers and disciples of Christ. It is love that is reflective of the 'divine love' (*agape*). A love that is like that of God's action in Christ, the unmerited action of pure love and reconciliation with those who had gone astray. It's love that is based on that love of Christ, whose action overcame evil with good.

Paul's letter was written to the often fractious, quarrelsome, ungrateful Church of the first century, and it survives to be shared with the often fractious, quarrelsome, ungrateful Church in every age and place... this parish community and any other. Paul says, 'Lay aside the works of darkness [your pettiness, your rage, and your need to seek revenge] and put on the armor of light' because ... time is passing. 'Owe no one anything save to love one another.' Be gentle, with kindly affection... Love.

The passage from Exodus reminded us of the Passover, and the keeping of the commandments given to Moses... the Law, our Covenant with God. In the days Jesus walked with his disciples on the earth, as in the days of the early *Ecclesia*, his followers sought to follow the Law. It's noteworthy that only the authors of Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel urge us to look for the log in our own eyes before noticing the spect in our neighbors.' Similarly, St. Paul reminds us that all of the commandments "are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

So in the midst of this of this crazy world in which we live, we are called to love our neighbor. And whenever we gather together as the *Ecclesia*, Christ's Body, let's show our love! Be gentle, with kindly affection one to another... Love. †