

Texts: Romans 13:8-14 and Matthew 18:15-20

Title: Labour Day: Binding what is good to our hearts

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There is a ritual, an ancient Jewish ritual, of taking 2 boxes, each containing parts of the Hebrew scriptures and wrapping these one to the left upper arm, close to the heart, winding the cord down the arm and over the left hand.

The other is tied around the head, laying the box on the forehead in between the two eyes. It is called "laying Tefillin" or in English: phylacteries

The practice is based on a literal reading of Deuteronomy 6, where Moses tells the people of Israel:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."

The "hand" symbolizes action, while the "head" and "eyes" indicate sight, direction, and focus.

Bind these words to your hand and your head. Among orthodox Jewish people, this practice has been around at least for 2000 years. Evidence of the Tefillin was found at Qumran (ca. 1st century BCE/BC; site of the Dead Sea Scrolls) and in caves used by the Bar Kokhba rebels in the 2nd century CE/AD.

In our gospel reading, Matthew writes in the context of a passage about reconciliation, words of Jesus saying: "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven".

Earlier in Matthew chapter 16 Jesus is recorded to have said these words to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven".

Binding and Loosing. Taking the words of scripture and binding them to a situation or loosening them from a situation.

Scholar, Mark Allan Powell, at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, writes:

"For Matthew, the issue is the identification of what is wrong and what is right – it is the application of Biblical and traditional principles to the specific parts of our lives. And we do it as we challenge each other, express our differences and aim to be together in unity"

And in this passage, we are given a picture of how our Christian ethics and values are worked out in community – as we work together to apply the ways of Jesus to our lives.

Many have read this passage quite literally... with a view that when someone's behaviour does not align with the communities ethics or values, we are to approach them one on one, then with another, and then ask them to leave...

“Someone offends you, confront them. If that doesn't work, try an intervention. If that fails, cut them off and kick them out.”

Yet this passage is in the bigger context of hospitality, searching and forgiveness. Why would Jesus now talk about asking someone to leave if they disagree or if we disapprove of their behaviour?

This passage is a part of Jesus' response to their question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

His answer is multifaceted, and includes some of the most quotable lines of Jesus:

- I assure you that if you don't become like a little child, you will not enter the kingdom (18:3) - vulnerable and powerless (not innocent)
- Whoever welcomes one such child, welcomes me. (18:5) - Jesus identified with the vulnerable, powerless and those who welcome them
- If your hand or foot causes you to fall into sin, chop it off and throw it away. (18:8) - Beware of your pride! And get rid of anything that gets in your way of following Jesus
- If someone had a hundred sheep and one of them wandered off, wouldn't he leave the ninety-nine on the hillsides and go search for the one that wandered off? (18:12) - God is not interested in Return on investment or the ends justifying the means- all people are valuable and everything is risked to save even one who is lost
- Then our passage: “If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them...”

Pulpit Fiction Podcast

What if Matthew isn't simply setting up the rules of engagement but rather is trying to build authentic Christian community?

And what if Matthew's major concern isn't actually settling disputes but creating an environment where a community are invited to lean into Christ's forgiveness, healing, and joy?

Perhaps this week's passage is not simply the product of an all-too-legalistic Matthew, but rather is offered by someone who knows that relationships take work to maintain and that community is harder to forge and nurture than we might imagine.

And that finding our way, as we live Christlike lives is not easy?

Rules and values are not automatically bound to everything but are discerned together as we live life in community.

Friends, going to someone with our concerns or grievances is a lot harder than talking behind their back.

Bringing others to listen closely to what is said takes a lot more courage than posting something on Facebook.

And working out ethics and values as a community together rather than simply dispensing judgment on others can be really, really hard.

Suddenly loosing and binding are not promises of power but instead invite extreme caution before setting anything in stone as the way we regard others on earth.

We do ethics in conversation. We do ethics together. There is no final rule book. But as we discuss with each other, as we love each other. Ethics actually becomes a law written on our hearts, rather than in our minds.

We move toward what Wendell Berry in our first reading calls a Sympathetic Mind – that is ruled by love. A love for self and a love for neighbour.

Not based on being right or wrong, but based on compassionate consideration of all that is present.

Struggling and wrestling along the way as we discern our actions is part of the life of faith. It's actually a path of exposing our desires and laying them down. Working out in community what we will bind and what we will loose.

Taking abstract values and living them out into reality.

The emergence of Labour Day is an example:

The celebration of Labor Day—a day of rest and respect—emerged out of conflict. First celebrated in 1882 by the Central Labor Union in Boston, "Labor Day" became a federal holiday in 1894 in response to the deaths of a number of workers during the Pullman Strike between labor unions and railroads.

The labor movement, often in partnership with Christian leaders, went on to become the source of many of the benefits and rights that both blue and white collar employees hold dear today: vacations, holidays, workers compensation, days off, health insurance, disability, and collective bargaining.

Labor Day is more than symbolic. It reflects the prophetic concern for justice for the hardworking, poor, and vulnerable.

Binding the values of human dignity to our heads and to our hands in the way we treat people in the workplace.

Equality for people who identify as LGBTQ 2S is another example.

Matthews gospel indicates that the church, a body of people attempting to follow the teachings of Jesus, has the authority to discern the application of laws and values and ethics.

And we don't do this alone as individuals, we do it together in conversation.

We share our lives with one another – especially when we don't know which way to go. These are the times when most of us want to keep to ourselves and only come out when we have it all figured out, and yet these are the times when we need the communal conversation – not to be talked about, or gossiped.

But together deeply listening both to the situation at hand, the ways of Jesus and our tradition, and to honour that deep in our hearts is the Spirit, guiding us.

Many processes exist for us to discern our actions together:

- The Quaker process of the clearness committee (see: http://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/Parker-Palmer_Clearness-Committee.pdf) Here members of the community gather around an individual who is struggling to know what to do, perhaps we are unable to know the way because of our own confusion, habitual thinking, fear, or despair. The purpose is not to tell them what to do, rather to ask helpful questions so that an individual can think more clearly and sense the Spirit's nudge on their way forward. Is used this process as I discerned for ordination – asking questions of my own desire – is this primarily about a desire for power, for affirmation, for control?
- Lectio Dina is another. Listening to a sacred reading many times over, allowing the words to sink in, connecting to a phrase, letting it rest in our hearts, layering it with meaning in our lives and our situations, listening for the invitation of the Spirit. And all this done in the context of community. As we listen to how others make meaning of their lives and find their way.

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts...

Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Amen.