

**Proper 18A – September 6, 2020, St. Anne’s
Exodus 12 :1-14 , Romans 13:8-14, Mathew 18:15-20**

In today’s gospel reading we’re told that when 2 or 3 are gathered in prayer in Jesus’ name God will answer their prayer. Wrenched out of its context we have tended to turn this into a warm and fuzzy sentiment about the power of prayer. And that in turn has resulted in us treating prayer as if it was simply a ‘to-do’ list for God. But clearly, it’s not so simple as just getting someone else to pray with us so that God gives us whatever we ask for. For example, I’m quite sure that there were **way** more than 2 or 3 people in Louisiana praying **fervently** that hurricane Laura would not hit their area last month. And that *multitudes* of people have prayed for a quick end to the Covid-19 pandemic over the last few months. Despite the seemingly simple and absolute promise this verse appears to give us, we need to look at its *context* to understand what it’s really about. This verse is embedded in a section about seeking forgiveness and reconciliation among fellow church members. We are being reminded here, that when we gather in Jesus name, Jesus **is** with us - bringing divine forgiveness and reconciliation to our earthly life. So, this is not about prayer as a kind of magic act where we put in a prayer and out pops the requested ‘whatever’. It’s about the power of prayer to *bind us together* -with God and with each other. And it’s about the fact that when we *do* gather together as a community of faith – in whatever format and no matter how many or how few of us there are – Jesus **is** there in our midst as a **part** of the community. Even when we’d really prefer to ignore his presence.

Matthew included this section in his gospel out of deep concern about the need for honest-to-goodness, authentic community in Christian gatherings and churches. Building community, *authentic* community, is hard work and it *always has been*. There’s *never* been a time when all was sweetness and light and life with others was easy. And so, the bible is full of passages like today’s with admonitions on

topics like loving one another, forgiveness, reconciliation and dealing with the *realities* of ‘community’.

‘Community’ is one of those feel-good words – when we think of community we often imagine something out of *Cheers*, a place where you're accepted, everyone is ‘nice’, where you're never lonely, and where, of course, everyone knows your name. But being a community of *faith isn't* meant to be the same as a social club or a belonging to the board of the local art gallery. While our church community can, and indeed *should*, fulfil **some** of the social aspects that we get from participation in other communities, it's also meant to be something much deeper and harder. It's meant to be a place where we are deeply and authentically *human* and are in relationship with others who themselves are working on being deeply and authentically human.

But - the really difficult thing about community is that it's made up of people! And people, -well, not you and me, of course - but **most** people – can be difficult, challenging, self-centred, unreliable, emotionally volatile and all the other ways we can, and **do**, fall short of perfection. And so, far too often in the church, we settle for being superficially ‘nice’ to one another while papering over both any underlying disagreements and our lack of common *focus*, instead of actually *working to build* authentic community. The good news is Christians aren't expected to be perfect. The bad news is, whether out of insecurity, bad training, or habit, too often we **do** put our own wants, needs, and desires ahead of those of others. And this means there will *always* be quarrels, differences of opinion, disappointments, hurt feelings, bent pride, loss of face, and lots of mistakes when we gather.

It's into this reality that Jesus speaks. Let me summarize the salient points:

1. **All** people fall far short of perfection.

2. Churches are made up of people. (see point 1 for what that means)
3. Therefore, *when* conflict happens (as it inevitably *will*) and **you're** involved, you are commanded to go talk to the other person **directly** like a mature adult rather than bitch to your friends behind his or her back.
4. **If**, and **only** if, that doesn't work, involve a few other members of the community. This isn't a "gathering of witnesses" or a way to get support for *your* side of the issue but rather a way to preserve the *community* affected by the dispute.
5. If **that** doesn't work, things are serious and the community itself is at risk.

Now, all of that might sound pretty much like the kind of good advice that you might get from a relationship coach. But, the difference is that we are explicitly intended to involve our relationship with **God** in this. Today's gospel reading is set in a longer section about forgiveness: how important it is to God, about how important it is for us, and about how hard it can be to actually extend and receive it. It's important to keep this context in mind because *without* keeping the centrality of *forgiveness* in our relationships firmly in mind, it's easy to hear the verses in this week's reading as just a recipe for dealing with those troublesome 'other' people rather than hearing it addressed to our own behavior.

But, read in light of the larger context of forgiveness and relationship, the focus changes. The primary goal is no longer to change someone *else's* behavior, or demonstrate how he or she is wrong, or even to invite him or her to repentance (even if they really, really need it!) Rather, the goal is to restore a damaged relationship by speaking truthfully about the breach or hurt **you** are experiencing, taking responsibility for **your** feelings and your actions and inviting the other person to do the same, and inviting dialogue and conversation to try to find a way forward *together*. Jesus invites us to love each other enough to speak not just *to*, and certainly **not about**, but *with* each other, holding each other accountable

through **vulnerability** rather than by force of will. After all, it takes *guts* to talk to someone you think is in the wrong without judging them or subtly (or *not so* subtly) putting them down. And it takes guts to **listen** when someone else tries to tell you what *they* feel and experience. In this way of relating, the key is to put the **relationship** above being **right** or getting your own way. And also, to take incredibly seriously how **much** *God* wants us to be in good relationship - with each other *and* with God.

Acting in this way is important because all of this is a way of living as if we really **believe** that Jesus **is** in the room with us when 2 or 3 gather. Supporting us to be sure but also *holding us to account* for what we do and don't do. A lot of what we do in church goes on without thinking about Jesus' words at all. We take them for granted rather than ask ourselves, what difference **does it make** that Jesus **is** in the midst of *everything* we do here? Everything we talk about – and fail to talk about? Every decision we make, or avoid? Maybe our mantra shouldn't just be, “What Would Jesus *Do*?” but, “What Would Jesus Hear?” “What Would Jesus Think, of what we do and don't do, or say or don't say?”

Authentic community is hard. It's work! It's especially hard right now when we are limited in the ways we can physically gather. But it's worth it. It's worth going out of our own comfort zone to support the life of the community. Because it's only in the midst of *community* that we experience the reality of God's fellowship and existence. And, as Jesus promises, when we gather in this way - with honesty and integrity, *even* when it's hard - amazing things can happen. Because Jesus **is** with us, right there, in our very midst.