

**THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**September 6, 2020; 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

SCRIPTURE READING

Romans 13:8-14

<sup>8</sup> Owe no debt to anyone, except the debt that calls us to love one another; for one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this, "Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>10</sup> Love never wrongs anyone; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

<sup>11</sup> Besides, you know the time in which we are living. It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; <sup>12</sup> the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; <sup>13</sup> let us live honorably as in the daylight, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup> Instead, let us clothe ourselves with the Savior Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of darkness.

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 18:15-20

<sup>15</sup> "If your sister or brother commits some wrong against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If she or he listens to you, you have won a loved one back. <sup>16</sup> If not, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup> If your sister or brother refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Abba God in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

SERMON

"Fighting Fighting"

Rev. Martin McGeachy

Our Gospel reading today is a very wise and helpful outline of a process of what to do about disagreement in a church setting. First, go to the person with whom you have a problem (instead of just complaining about it to your best friend), and be up front about your disagreement. If that doesn't work, then bring a couple of good folks to help mediate, and if you're still stuck, bring it before the whole church and get them in on it. If that so-in-so still stubbornly refuses to listen, let that person be as a Gentile or tax collector, a faithless one, to you. That model is in some form or fashion exactly what our Presbytery's mediation team uses as a guide when we have to help churches in discord. And with some variation it can work in secular settings as well. But I notice that in this narrative, it assumes that your aim is to convince this ne'er-do-well to see things your way. It would be helpful going into the process to remember that it might just be YOU who's the stubborn so-in-so, or maybe both of you. Always carry into this a healthy dose of humility (see Philippians 2:3), and the courage to speak the truth in love. (Ephesians 4:15)

Still, it may have occurred to you, hearing this Scripture, to wonder about the promise that if two of us agree about anything, God will do it. Because clearly that ain't happening. The reason is because in our present existence of earthly reality, tainted by sin, even in our agreement we can't reach the level of spiritual oneness that Jesus is describing when he says to agree. What's to be done? Keep trying, and rely on him. In the Gospels there's a story of Jesus' disciples, those closest to him, who were unable to cure a boy suffering from possession, so Jesus does it for them, and says to them, you failed **"Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."** (Matthew 17:20) These are the same disciples whom Jesus earlier sent out into the towns to offer love and healing, "and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure." (Matthew 10:1) You know who else has the authority to heal, cast out demonic rage, and move mountains? You and I, if we have the faith. And just like the disciples, we wonder why we can't do it. But we can. Maybe we don't have the faith to literally hurl a mountain into the sea, but we can and do move mountains all the time through our love and good works. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women and men of faith moved mountains of racist systems of bigotry, from Thurgood Marshall to Rosa Parks to the Little Rock Nine, the Freedom Riders, Dr. King and his soldiers of peace, and thousands upon thousands of unnamed others who stood up, or sat down, on buses and in lunch counters, and spoke out. Laws changed. Hearts changed. Many people today despair when confronted by the horror of racism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, saying "Nothing has changed." But it has. Look at how far we have come, and take heart. Mountains have been moved. Unfortunately, there is a whole mountain range, bigger than the Rockies, that has yet to be made smooth as John the Baptist and Isaiah called us to do: "'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths of God! <sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; <sup>6</sup> and all shall see the salvation of God.'" (Luke 3:4-6)

Have you ever been on a tough hike up rough terrain to see a beautiful view from a mountaintop, and after you've been at it awhile, you're really over it? You've had enough walking, and you keep thinking you're almost there, and you round a curve thinking the vista will open up in front of you, and you only see more path, going up and up and up. Take heart; we will get there, and the view will be spectacular. But we have further to go. Keep taking the next right step, and keep the faith, whatever measure we can muster today. Maybe today, in the midst of deep division and quarreling that feels overwhelming, we can start, well not exactly with mountain-moving; maybe we could do some of this "agreeing" that Jesus has given us the authority over. Again, this side of heaven, we can't get to the purity of perfect agreement that exists in oneness with God, but we can use our faith to make straight the path that is immediately in front of us.

Last week I mentioned that at the dawn of creation, Adam was given the job and authority to name all the creatures of the earth, that naming helping to create their natures. That naming was done perfectly in Eden—although it's easy for me to imagine Adam saying, "Yuck! These are called 'roaches,' and these 'ticks,' and I

declare that they have no constructive purpose.” But then, I’m sure the perfect wisdom of God knows something we don’t about parasitic bugs.

God certainly knows more about human purpose than we do. We believe that in our disagreements and quarrels, we need to fight to defend our cause. Jesus, as always, teaches the opposite of what seems natural. By the time we’re two years old, we’ve decided that when we’re hit, we should hit back, and that impulse follows us our whole lives. Kind of like my dog Winnie, who snarls at us if we accidentally stumble over her, which we do constantly because she sits at our feet hoping we will spill food onto her. You and I aren’t toddlers, and we’re not beasts; we are children and heirs of God’s own being. And our elder sibling Jesus tells us that the only way to disagree is to arm ourselves with truthful, justice-filled love, even unto our bitterest enemies.

If those with whom you disagree will not listen, let them be to you as Gentiles or tax collectors, verse 17 says. Maybe you’re like me, and grew up believing that meant those ignorant bozos should be cut out of your life. “They” are not one of “us” any longer—it’s harsh, isn’t it? But how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He welcomed them, ate with them, invited them into his tribe. When we disagree, we are called to continue to welcome, and see every person as the child of God they were created to be.

We welcome all, no exceptions. They may not welcome our welcome, but that’s up to them. We can only control ourselves. Romans 12:18 explains, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

I’m aware that some disagreements are with people who may abuse us, or treat us or others unjustly. Such attitudes and actions are not to be tolerated. We are called to speak out and stand in the way of others being hurt, and if an individual continues to hurt us, it is our responsibility to cut ourselves off from that abuse, even if it means cutting ourselves off from relationship. BUT, if in our hearts we then cast that person as a hurtful villain, and continually nurture those thoughts and feelings, we are continuing to be abused in our thoughts even when they aren’t around. The only solution is forgiveness, perhaps from afar; and that can bring prayers of love and light for their healing, as well as our own—and maybe even at some point reconciliation (with strong boundaries and safety in place).

Our faithfulness always brings us victory, for in faithfulness we are in agreement with God, and we know what agreeing on something means, right? We shall have it! It shall be done! Victory! We just have to make sure we’re also agreeing with God about the context of what victory and success are. Our weekly reading from the book of Psalms is 149, and my dad, the great modern psalmist, set it to the tune of “When You Wore a Tulip.” It’s a song of glorious praise, for the Almighty has “adorned the faithful with victory.” (v.4-5)

*O sing God a new song, a happy and true song,  
Let Israel join in the hymn,*

*With timbrel and dancing, and harp strings entrancing,  
With angels and cherubim.  
Let all of God's people shout out from the steeple,  
That faithful and true is God's word.  
O sing God a new song, a happy and true song.  
Let all of us praise the Lord.*

(Psalm 149, arranged by Pat McGeachy, to the tune of *When You Wore a Tulip*)

...which is an excellent musical snapshot of the overarching intent of Psalms 149, but in the second half of the original psalmist's version, there are some verses that Dad didn't address, quite rightly, because if we don't put them in context they lead us down a false path rather than to their true exultation:

<sup>5</sup> Let the faithful exult in glory;

let them sing for joy on their couches. [a phrase I love in the middle of quarantine, but refers in its historical period to reclining on a couch in a festival celebration]

<sup>6</sup> Let the high praises of God be in their throats

and two-edged swords in their hands,

<sup>7</sup> to execute vengeance on the nations

and punishment on the peoples,

<sup>8</sup> to bind their kings with fetters

and their nobles with chains of iron,

<sup>9</sup> to execute on them the judgment decreed.

This is glory for all of God's faithful ones. Praise the LORD!

The imagery is victory in warfare – but remember, Ephesians 6:12 tells us clearly that as warriors of the Christ, “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the ... the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” We do not take up arms against one another, no matter what the literal reading of a Scripture might suggest. We love one another, from family to foe, and seek unity among all living creatures. So I took a stab at Psalms 149:5-9 through that lens of love:

*Let all of God's faithful, sing out how you're grateful  
While you sit there on your settee  
We each have a sharp sword to cut out all discord  
From hatred we've been set free  
To help every neighbor, we'll wield a light-saber  
And cut out all trace of pain  
So in your recliner, sing joy—get Diviner!  
And welcome God's heavenly reign.*

Today is Communion Sunday. Surely the whole meaning of Holy Communion is not merely to bring us into oneness with Christ, for when we leave our neighbor out of the equation we will never be in agreement with the Lord, no matter how much bread and grape juice we consume. Remember Matthew 5:23-24: “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” We cannot leave our neighbor out of our relationship with

Christ. When we recite each week, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” that’s a reminder that a) we are forgiven; our neighbor deserves no less from us; and b) we cannot possibly be in a spiritual state of forgiveness if we are holding lack of forgiveness in our hearts. Be the solution you want in the world. We can’t sit on our couches and get angry at the people on the news we’d like to blame for all the turmoil. Please remember that whether you’re a donkey person, an elephant person, red, blue, purple, pink or yellow polka dot bikini person, you and I and they, whoever they are, share responsibility for naming this world and all that is in it. And if we want less turmoil, we must be agents of peace. If we want unity, we must do the reaching out.

In Dublin, Ireland at St. Patrick’s Cathedral there’s a 500 year old door with a hole cut in it, called “The Door of Reconciliation.” In 1492, the Ormand and Kildare families were engaged in a bloody feud. The Earl of Ormand’s nephew, Black James and his men, fleeing from the Earl of Kildare’s soldiers, sought sanctuary in St. Patrick’s, slamming the wooden door behind him. It’s said that Kildare realized their continuing hostility was destructive and useless, and shouted out for a truce. Black James, not trusting the Earl, stayed put. So the Earl of Kildare took his sword and hacked a hole in the door, inviting James to put his arm through and shake hands. James wasn’t quite ready to bare his arm to the swordsmen outside, so Kildare made the gesture, risking his own arm by thrusting it through the hole. They shook, and peace was made. It gives a whole new meaning to the expression, “taking up arms.”

So, too, has Christ outstretched his arms to us in reconciliation, calling us to the same. In this age of incredible division, an amazingly inadequate description when we are so inflamed that there’s rioting and murder in the street, your battle may be in your home, or in your own heart, there in quarantine upon your couch. There’s only one way to disagree. Armed with love. An old hymn I love has this great lyric, “Fight we the fight with sorrow and sin to set their captives free.” (Arthur Campbell Aigner, *A God Is Working His Purpose Out*, @ [The Hymnal](#), Atlanta: Presbyterian Church, 1955, p. 416, (#500)) I would underscore that. Fight the fighting. Speak the truth in love, humility and courage, and start by addressing yourself, before you talk to the world. And maybe we’ll agree. And God will agree to that. And we will move mountains together. Victory!

Amen.