Sermon for September 6, 2020

As part of completing the Master of Divinity degree required of pastors I worked as a chaplain in a hospital. As part of our program shared debriefs of meetings with patients. I still remember during one session a Franciscan chaplain shared about a patient of his. Over the weeks he visited a man who was angry at the Roman Catholic Church. The man’s daughter had committed suicide years before and the church at the time refused to do her funeral. Even though the church had moved to a new understanding of suicide, this man had been deeply hurt. The pain had created a separation from the church in a time when he needed God the most. Chaplain Eric sat by the man’s bedside for several weeks, listening to the man’s pain over how he felt the church had sinned against him when he lost his child. Until one day Eric had a breakthrough; God led him to apologize to the man on behalf of the church. Eric explained how it seemed to shift something for the patient. How powerful the acknowledgement of the wrong done to him was. It helped to bridge the separation between him and the church. Although Eric was not the priest who refused to bury his daughter all those years before, his willingness to accept the guilt, may have opened a path of restoration for this man. It was as though a huge debt had been lifted that this man was holding onto. He was finally able to release it because someone from the church had finally repaid it.

In the Romans reading today Paul writes this:

**“**Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments…and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

[Photo of Rev. Dr. Joy Johnson]

Last Sunday a group of multi-racial, interfaith clergy and lay people joined Sacramento Areas Congregations Together for a spiritual action called *From Lament to Hope*. At that event, Sac ACT President, Pastor Joy Johnson offered powerful words. I share just a snippet of her emotional reflection on lament, “Lament sits between what I believe and what I behold or what I see. It’s when what I see is a distortion of what ought to be…Lament is a sacred act. It’s the act of processing grief that is too severe for normal prayer or normal practices…Our lament is a message of liberation as we release our problem to a God who cares…We lament that Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness is a “Whites Only” idea…We lament that what we understood as equal rights and equal treatment under the law was an illusion…We lament justice has been denied to our families for generations.”

“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another…”

The first community of Matthew’s gospel must have been dealing with a lot of strain and conflict. Because Jesus feels it’s important to give them some tools for when troubles arise. And in any community, troubles most certainly will arise. The danger is to let tensions and strain undermine the work we do together as the church for the sake of the world. For the sake of the lost. For the sake of our sisters and brothers outside the community in need of the witness we can give to God’s love and mercy. But only if we know how to be merciful and loving with one another in times of great disagreement.

It is probably no secret that tensions and hurts already exist even in our own church community here at St. John’s. There are divisions and conflict in our families. Disagreements and slights between friends. All of them exacerbated by the reality of being physically separated from one another by the chasm of a pandemic. That also heightens fears and all the emotions we keep in check in normal times. You know it’s bad when Jesus’ directives in the gospel of Matthew violate our new sense of normal – we can’t take two or three people with us. Not unless we socially distance, wear masks or get on a Zoom call.

Church in these times is a lot different than when Jesus gave these words of advice.

In an NPR interview Pulitzer Prize winning author Isabel Wilkerson talked about her new book *Caste.* In the interview she shared a metaphor for our current grappling with systemic racism and personal responsibility. That denying our responsibility to change racist policies and systems that still take hold of our nation is like buying an old house. Though we clearly did not design or build it, once we bought it and inhabit it, we are responsible to fix it up. So denying our culpability means little in terms of our responsibility when the roof caves in on someone. Last Sunday as I sat in my car with other faith leaders – white, black, brown and all shades in between a member of the church was standing before us, confronting us again with the reality of sin that stands between us. A rift that leaves debt outstanding that someone must pay before restoration is possible.

The text from Matthew today presumes that when tensions arise the Christian life is one of confrontation. But the purpose of the confrontation is not what we have come to expect and even participate in. It is not meant as a gotcha moment or in order to cancel the other out. In fact, instead of cutting someone off, the deep hope is for the other to be brought closer. Into a more intimate and meaningful relationship in which we are all vulnerable enough to admit our own sin as easily as we point out that of others.

“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another…”

What precedes today’s reading from Matthew is the parable of the lost sheep. You probably remember that one. Jesus tells an anecdote about a shepherd, who makes a poor economic decision. He opts to leave 99 out of 100 sheep in the wilderness to fend for themselves against predators in order to find the one that has gone astray. This is how deeply God grieves even one who is lost and needs to be reconciled.

But it is tempting in that parable and in today’s reading to always think it is the “other” who needs to be brought back from the wayward path. Or needs to hear how they have wronged ME!

But the rift of sin is rarely a one-way street. God doesn’t so much care that someone hurt us particularly, but that relationship between the children of God is broken. And the reality is often more complex than finding fault with one person who needs to own up. There can be pain and hurt on all sides. There can be rationale for why a pain was caused in the first place. There can be denial of the fault because we were not even aware that we were causing pain. But the separation is still there. And both are diminished by it.

Today I confess to you that I find it too easy to forget the humanity of someone whose views are the polar opposite of mine. It is easier to demonize; to make assumptions about them in other parts of their lives; to make blanket statements about them when I am with others who think like me. To want to cut them off rather than bring them closer.

“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another…”

Sometimes I think we miscalculate the debt of guilt and shame, which keeps us from being able to reach across the divides and accept responsibility. We may be so divided that we cannot see it. But that is the reality of Sin in our lives. Because not to see the other as valuable enough to be in relationship with, is a diminishment of our ability to understand who God is. Because if all of us are made in God’s image, then to cut off or be separated from anyone means we know less about who God is for not knowing that person.

In the end Jesus tells us that if we have tried to reconcile with the other and cannot get through, we should treat them as a Gentile and a tax collector. Sounds like cancel culture to me!

But wait, how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?

Oh, that’s right, he sat at the table with them and even called one of them to write the very gospel story we heard today.

Jesus treated tax collectors and Gentiles as worthy, when others saw them as beyond redeeming. When others would cancel them from among those saved, Jesus reached across the divide to share the bread of life and cup of salvation, even with those who betrayed him.

You see, Jesus went to the cross to pay a debt that was not his own, accepting the fault of humanity for the sake of reconciling us all to one another.

 “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the debt to love one another…”