

**Grace Episcopal Church Galena, Illinois**  
**September 7, 2014**  
**13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18A**  
**The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell**  
Text-- Matthew 16: 15-20

My deepest desire as a preacher is to proclaim the Gospel in a way that makes a difference. A difference in the individuals who hear me, and a difference to the congregation. For you see, I believe that the Gospel really matters, and a sermon, as an exploration of a passage of scripture should matter, too. A sermon should not be simply an edifying lecture that engages the intellect. It may sometimes be that, but not only that. It is not just a lesson in ancient history and the practices of a long ago time that may interest us for the moment but not have a lasting effect. It is not a stump speech or a feel good story or even a moral lesson that is engaging but soon wears thin. It may well be some or all of those, but, again, it must be more.

My friend and colleague Bonnie Perry puts it bluntly: "If the Gospel doesn't change us, it's not worth a rat's tail." That may be a bit too graphic for some of us, but she is right.

For the Gospel we proclaim is the Good News of Jesus Christ. And Jesus meant to change the world. He meant to change how humanity understood and related to God, to creation, and to one another. He meant for us to come out from our tribes and our narrow ways and to carry His news to the ends of the earth.

Each passage we read on Sunday mornings is a three-layered story. It is a story in its own right of what happened: what Jesus said or did, how his disciples and others responded. It is then a story of how the early Christian community

heard it in the time that the Gospel was written some years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Heard and responded to within what was happening in particular lives, places, and contexts. And, it is hopefully a story that touches us in real and meaningful ways in our world these many centuries later. A witness to God's continuing to speak through these stories in all times and circumstances.

I say that I want my sermons to matter—to touch and change those who hear them. I do not delude myself with thinking that any one sermon will bring the house down, set the place on fire, or spark a movement. No, it will be small, I'm sure. One or two people who feel affirmed as beloved people of God. Or leave this place with a small shift in their way of thinking about a passage—maybe even having an “a-ha” moment. It might even be someone sitting up straight in the pew and thinking, “where did she ever get that idea? I have to think about that!” Or disagree and challenge what I say. Just about any of the above—anything but a yawn or a snore—would do, especially if it results in some dialog!

Of course, every message depends upon the particular passage we are given by our lectionary. Some seem quite straightforward, some even so familiar to us that it is hard to hear them with new ears. And some are so different and foreign from our lives that we struggle to find a way to relate to them. And then, there are those that help us realize that as different as our lives are from those of the first century, the human condition stays the same in many respects. That human beings have the same kinds of basic problems in every time and place.

That's the kind of passage we have today. It is not a story about Jesus' healings or miracles. It is not a parable. It is simply a teaching about what to do when there is conflict in the church.

Conflict in the church. Not something that most of us care to think about. We pride ourselves on being tolerant and inclusive. We like each other, and fussing or complaining about something someone does or says isn't worth upsetting the peace. And yet, we are human. Things get under our skin. We might feel unappreciated or disrespected, blown off by the rector, a warden, or another member. A theological stance or emphasis might rub us the wrong way. We might disagree with some action the church is taking. Or how it is spending its money—some want to maintain secure our own future. Others might like to feed the world. Some feel we should move toward contemporary worship and music. Others would like to return to the 1928 Prayer Book—or the 1662. I exaggerate a bit, but you know what I mean. The fact is, we are very different people who come from a variety of religious backgrounds with our experiences of what is most meaningful to us. Most have had times in previous churches that were special, maybe spectacularly so. Who can blame us for wanting to replicate them? Others have been wounded or disappointed and understandably shy away from a repeat.

All of that is to show how very hard it is to live in community. Especially a church community where some of the most important life events take place. It was hard in Jesus' time when the community was just forming. It was hard in Matthew's time when assembling together could lead to ostracism or even persecution. It is hard for us today when much of society doesn't understand—or even care—why we want to gather.

So, what do we do when we come up against a challenge to what we care deeply about? Do we sweep it under the rug where it may fester so that one day, we may simply walk away in dissatisfaction? Or do we act in other human ways? Bring in a third person with the hope of finding a kindred spirit—or even having that person intervene and fix the situation. This is called “triangulation.” I’m sure you’re familiar with the entire discipline of family systems theory that has grown up around triangles and other relationship dynamics. Ever since a rabbi, Edwin Friedmann applied family systems to churches in the 1980s, it has become part of the seminary curriculum for those preparing for parish ministry.

Triangles are a natural part of human relationships. They are seductive because they temporarily reduce anxiety when you find someone who seems to agree with your point of view. But they can become toxic and actually increase anxiety because they prevent the direct and open communications necessary for a healthy congregation.

Jesus got there first, before the social scientists, before Rabbi Friedmann. And make no mistake, in this passage in Mark, Jesus is talking about the well being of the community, not so much about individual arguments. A straightforward formula: go directly to the one who has offended you—hurt you, sinned against you. Talk it through. If that isn’t satisfactory take two or three others. Mind you, this isn’t to gang up on the other person or to pass judgment, but to listen, to witness with other sets of ears.

Then, it gets sticky. Because the next step seems to lay the groundwork for expelling or excommunicating. It is taking the dispute to the church.

Hopefully, that would be an extraordinary circumstance. “Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector,” Jesus says. We know that Gentiles and tax collectors were outsiders, not desirable as members of the community. Harsh.

But let’s not forget how Jesus treated the tax collectors and Gentiles. With mercy. With always the chance of entering or re-entering the fold. And how he emphasized finding the lost and bringing them back. So, there is always that possibility. You see, for Jesus, the ultimate mercy is love and forgiveness, the mission is restoration to community. So, here, removing someone from the community is the tragic choice of one who refuses the efforts of reconciliation.

Today’s passage illustrates to us the difficulty of living in community. It also reminds us that Christ is in that community whenever two or three of us are gathered. Our life together is not meant to be just a collection of individual relationships with Christ but bigger and richer in its shared body. So, maintaining its health is of great importance, even when it means taking the risk of being direct and real with one another.

We are quite fortunate here at Grace Church. We seem to be free of the kinds of conflict that has eroded, even destroyed, the health of some congregations. We do really seem to like and care about one another. We believe that we are friendly and welcoming. And we are, for the most part. There are some, however, who have not experienced that welcoming spirit.

So, this fall, we are bringing together some folk to brainstorm about hospitality. How to not just greet people in a friendly manner but how to make our welcome as authentic as we can to all that we can, finding ways to ever exhibit the love, the grace, and the mercy of the God who dwells with us in this place.