

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
Sermon by The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson  
Proper 18 Year A  
September 7, 2014

This week I became embroiled in some church drama,  
which really blindsided me.

I thought I was asking a simple yes or no question of someone  
and suddenly there was a flurry of nasty emails,  
a sense of "I'll take my toys and go home"  
and raw emotions surfacing it seemed from all involved,  
myself included.

I certainly did not ignite this drama scene on purpose,  
and yet of course,  
since drama seems to happen among and between people  
who are in relationship,  
no one cannot eliminate him or herself  
from some responsibility in the event.

My sense, though,  
is that life is full enough of real drama,  
of situations that rightly demand our care and concern,  
which draw us into that place of deep vulnerability and risk;  
so I often wonder why it is a tendency for many  
to create drama over seemingly small things.

Jesus tells us today in our gospel story that drama,  
the made-up kind,  
is going to happen in a church.  
People will intentionally or unintentionally hurt or offend others,  
feelings will become raw,  
people will harbor resentments,  
grudges will be nursed for years,  
people will purposefully withhold money  
from the mission of the church

for an argument they have had with someone  
or because they disagree with one of many doctrines of the church,  
and sadly people will leave.  
Drama will happen.

This body of Christ, this glorious group of people  
who have been knit together  
in the love and presence of the risen Christ  
will be fractured  
and the challenge of living together  
as a welcoming community of believers  
will be before us each and every moment.

How we deal with drama in a church setting  
is always interesting, to say the least, don't you think?  
When our spirit of generosity is operating at its fullness,  
we can hope that we will look beneath or around  
the particular drama  
to see if it could be pain fueling the explosion of emotions,  
for if it is,  
then that is what needs to be attended to first and foremost.

Or when we are not our most gracious self,  
we may assume it's the other person's ego  
or desire to be in control that's driving the event,  
and our natural tendency may to push back against it.  
This rarely though brings about healing,  
but only an escalation of the drama.

Jesus tells us this morning, with a sense of urgency,  
to deal with the drama,  
to mend the relationships,  
and then get on with the work Jesus has left for us to do ~  
the work and ministry of reconciliation.  
Paul speaks of this same sense of urgency

in his letter to the Romans, reminding us in our reading today that we are to wake up.

We are to stop living as though nothing has changed.  
We are to put aside the works of darkness:  
we are to stop gratifying ourselves  
by harming and provoking each other;  
and we are to put on the armor of light,  
by loving our neighbor as ourselves.

The texts this morning are rather harsh and challenging texts to grapple with on this Welcome Back Sunday, when our hearts are filled with joy and a sense of being reunited in community, of our body being re-membered again after our summer of vacations and Sabbath.

But it is a good message to hear at this time of renewal and recommitment to our parish. For I think Jesus' urgency in telling us to fix our relationships within the church is to remind us that there is a broken world outside our doors, a world that needs our energy and attention.

When we look at what has transpired in our world in this past year, there are many situations which have worsened; disturbing trends in law enforcement have been revealed to us in Ferguson MO, a resumption of dangerous tensions between Moscow and the Western democracies has occurred; an awareness of one tier of our economy falling further behind, leaving despair among all age groups has become apparent; border wars between terrified migrants and people bearing arms against children has happened;

and even here in our own town of Shippensburg,  
the number of children who could not afford  
to purchase their own pencil cases doubled, from 250 to 500.  
The urgency with which Jesus speaks in our text today is based  
upon the fact that our purpose of being together  
as the body of Christ  
is not so we can be one happy family,  
the purpose of our being together is so that we,  
as a body,  
strengthened by Christ's love and our love for each other,  
can live out and into Jesus' purpose ~  
that of reconciling humankind and creation with God.  
When "drama" happens in the church,  
we will inevitably find that our focus has shifted  
from carrying the goodness of God into the world,  
to becoming insular and focused only our own problems  
or the divisions among us.

Jesus recognizes the fact that living in community is difficult.  
An analogy often used is that life in a church community  
is like being in a rock tumbler.  
We are each placed together,  
as unpolished and fairly rough stones,  
and over time, actually over a lot of time,  
through our tumbling up against each other,  
through our being broken open by the close presence of each other,  
by the sharp edges colliding,  
we will be polished into beautiful stones.  
Sometimes this growth is a joyful experience.  
Sometimes it involves pain.  
But I think Jesus is telling us today  
that we must always see the bigger picture.  
We are becoming polished stones together,  
not for our own benefit or to treasure our beauty,  
but so that our polished surfaces can be light of Christ in the world.

Our text today proscribes for us  
how to order our lives together  
so that we may be the shining beacon of light and hope  
in our community.

It is all about loving one another.

Really living into that love.

As Paul reminded us in his letter to the Romans last week,  
“Let love be genuine.”

One could say the intent of Jesus’ challenging message today  
is that in order for us to love one another  
we must listen to one another.

This is partly why today at 9 a.m.

we came together to listen to each other’s stories.

Listening to each other takes time, patience, and practice.

Listening to each other doesn’t mean

we will always agree with each other

or that our preference will be the one chosen.

Listening means to open the ears of our hearts

to truly hear the other person’s perspective,

to take a time of silence and reflection in the conversation,

and to allow our hearts and souls

to be changed by someone else’s story.

One way to practice deep listening to one another

is to practice listen deeply to God.

Many of us attend to our spiritual lives

by creating quiet times with God

and we know this is a difficult discipline.

Our minds, bodies and souls

often scream at us to “do something”, think something,

get on with life,

when we try to silence our being before God

for even a short period of time.

But it is the voice of God within  
which brings calm and direction,  
which allows us to be present to others,  
which drains the negative energy out of the present,  
so that we can go on,  
listening to those who share our journey.  
Perhaps our mantra in our daily prayers,  
and in our life together can be:  
Give me the grace to be quiet and listen for your voice in my heart.

We open our hearts to hear the voice of God  
when we come forward to receive communion today  
and also when we enter the sacristy for healing prayers.  
These are both sacramental times  
when we may offer to God those relationships  
that need to be healed,  
those within our parish  
and those within other areas of our church;  
the relationship where you have been offended  
and may be harboring a resentment  
which is always happy to leap to the surface again.  
It is a time to pray for Jesus' grace  
to place within your heart the calm and peace  
so you may speak to that person  
in a graceful and generous manner.  
And if you fear you have offended someone else,  
intentionally or not,  
I invite you to pray that an open place  
will emerge in your heart for your best response  
if they come to speak to you  
or for the clarity and confidence in Christ's love to go  
and ask for their forgiveness.

I encourage you to invite Jesus into that place in your heart,  
by laying it on the altar

as you kneel to receive the real presence of Christ  
or when you kneel to have hands laid upon your head  
and allow Christ's healing to flow through your body.

For Jesus reminds us today of something very powerful:  
we're not expected to do this hard work of reconciliation  
by ourselves.

Jesus makes this outlandish promise  
that when two or three are gathered in his name,  
he will be among them.

Among them.

Not with one and not the other,  
but present to both.

And then Jesus goes on to say,  
that if two of us ask for something together,  
it will be given to us.

This is a stunning proclamation of the power of God.

What we ask for together will be given to us.

I think this is true though  
because if two have come together in heart,  
to ask God of something,  
there is peace among them.

And where peace is, Christ is,  
and what we ask will be of Christ, and for Christ,  
and will bring about healing in our world,  
which is always Christ's mission.

On this day, this wonderful day  
when we come together as a parish family  
with hope and anticipation of new ways of connecting with God,  
with a deeper commitment to serve God in our community,  
when we begin again in relationships,

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when we settle more deeply into the process  
of committing ourselves to one another and to God  
I would like to offer you a blessing  
which was adapted from the work of Henri Frederic Amiel,  
a Swiss philosopher who lived in the 1800's,

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Life is short,  
And we do not have much time  
to gladden the hearts of those who  
make the journey with us.  
So . . . be swift to love,  
and make haste to be kind.  
And the blessing of God,  
who made us,  
who loves us,  
and who travels with us  
be with you now and forever.  
Amen.

This blessing sums it all up.  
Life is short.  
Life is precious.  
Relationships are what matter.  
Being in right relationship with each other  
and with God is our highest priority as the body of Christ.  
Let us gladden the hearts of those who sit beside us,  
those whom we hold in our prayers,  
those who are new to us,  
those who are familiar with us.  
Let us be swift to love those who are “other” than us.  
I loved the image Mother Betsy  
brought forward in her sermon last week  
that those “other than us” are our burning bushes—  
the people who will illumine Christ to us,



the people who invite us to be Christ to them.  
Let us make haste to be kind.  
For when we are, we may ask together this day,  
that we may be the shining light of Christ  
in the midst of our world,  
bringing love and healing to all,  
and our prayers will be answered,  
and Christ's love will be shared.  
Amen.