

September 11, 2017

**On Being Community**  
**Matthew 18:15-22**

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Over the summer I have been fortunate enough to spend times with family  
And to spend a week with our new grand son, Calvin Rae. Thank you for your prayers for us in the  
time leading up to the birth. He and his mother are doing well.  
Before he was born he already had a place in our hearts.  
he is loved, accepted and cared for before he has done anything! Because he is part of the family  
It is to be expected that he will make mistakes and do or say things that hurt those closest to him  
in love will continue and the family will endeavour to help him love God, others and himself.  
Family is important! And wonderful, and messy altogether.  
It is in this context that I approached the lectionary gospel passage for today.  
Community of faith is as important as family is to Calvin Rae.  
Today we also continue our focus on discipleship.  
Throughout this chapter in Matthew's gospel, Jesus teaches about the important of the "church"  
And the role of disciples who were to both to understand the importance of the family of faith,  
And to learn to act in ways that build and keep community  
As we can see from the first lines of Matthew 18 the disciples had a lot to learn!  
"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" they asked Jesus.  
It is a question that comes from competition, ego and pride, and a desire to be greater than others  
In response to this very human question, very human attitude Jesus taught about disciples'  
responsibility to form and keep community.  
In Matthew 18 alone Jesus gave the disciples at least 7 ways to act that build community.  
The first was about respecting and loving others as self  
He said humble yourself to be humble like a child, in God's way of being the humblest is greatest  
What could be more humble than a baby who arrives naked and is dependent on others for everything?  
Who does not know everything, but must be open to learn from those around them.  
"To be my disciples, become like this" Jesus says,  
How often do we think of discipleship as being open to learn rather than having to know the answers?  
Lesson two: help others to be successful  
It may seem obvious...but Jesus stressed it..."Don't put a stumbling block in front of "the little ones"  
I do not believe that the disciples were going around intentionally sticking their feet out to trip others  
I wonder if there are other ways we might trip up others?  
Perhaps requiring more of them than necessary or saying something that makes others think less of  
them...such actions break community, divide people.  
Jesus says that community is really important -- important enough to work toward  
As disciples our actions toward others count! Do not be responsible for others failing.....  
Lesson three: seeking the lost  
For this Jesus told the story of the lost sheep.  
For many of us this is a comforting story about God's love for us and the lengths God will go to find us  
But Jesus ends with "So it is not the will of the Father in heaven that one of these little ones be lost"  
But why is this in the middle of Jesus teaching about responsibilities to community of faith?  
If it is not God's will that any be lost, then as disciples we should work to ensure that none are lost  
Disciples are to seek others and bring them back, just as God seeks them  
We are called not just to invite others in, but to continually and intentionally reconcile with the lost.  
4. But, !!!! what about when others hurt us, disappoint us, disagree with us....  
Jesus taught: when we feel we have been wronged, we show the gap between what we say we believe  
and how we act more than almost any other time.....we all need to work on this aspect of  
discipleship, just as the disciples did which brings us to a process Jesus taught for how to act when  
conflict arises.

Actions that work toward resolution even if you feel you are the wronged party.

Jesus says...go yourself, if necessary go again with one or two others, try your hardest.

Peter who was not impressed said..."But Lord, how many times must I forgive someone in the community of faith that sins against me??"

This led to Jesus next point: "forgive until you lose count then continue forgiving, until you reach the most perfect amount of forgiveness" I wonder how different the church would look today we disciples of all times had sought to outdo each other in reconciling and forgiveness.

Jesus ended the teaching with another story of an unforgiving servant.

Words and images to carry with us and remind us of how to follow Jesus way even when it hurts.

It seems from this passage that Jesus was clear about the importance of the community together and each individual in it. About the importance of humility, forgiveness, reconciliation and love.

As we continue our series in discipleship, this is an important lesson, not just information to know...but ways to learn and practice acting in the world.

So what does this mean on September 10 2017? To us at St. Andrew's

- Community is important in the life of faith, important enough to work for.
- Our call as disciples is to work to be a community, to humbly learn from each other, to respect each other, to contribute to the life together
- In a congregation the size of ours we will not get to know everyone well, but it is important that we take the time to get to know others and to encourage others in faith. Perhaps you will do this through bible study, or through choir, or involvement in a Team or as a leader in Sunday school, through talking with those who sit around you in church.....
- Perhaps today you can look around you and notice who may be missing, and take steps to contact them and see how they are doing. Let them know they are missed.
- Perhaps today you might covenant to make being part of community a priority.
- The truth about community is it takes work. Like Jesus disciples and the early church conflict happens. The truth is that we are much more eager to be forgiven than to forgive those who have hurt us. Much more interested in finding ammunition to lob at someone than seeking reconciliation. As disciples it is our responsibility to be forgiving and reconciling people. This means we are to take the responsibility to ask for forgiveness, to seek the lost....and to take the initiative if we feel someone has wronged us.
- When someone wrongs us we are not to get even, unfriend that person, or seek to have them leave...nor are we to give up on community and walk away. Jesus teaches us that community is important enough to work to achieve. If we need help, we have a process outlined in Matt 18, let's use it.
- Lastly, how we talk about our community and represent it to others either shows people the light of the world, or hides it. Let's watch what we say about those with whom we disagree, whom we don't understand, who practice faith differently.

Just like our human families, the community of faith is important and wonderful and messy altogether! We will not always agree on our thoughts about God, or how we should dress or on music choices, or on many other things.

But we are all called as disciples to live the way of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Jesus says others will come to know you are my disciples if you have love for one another.

In a culture rife with competition, and retaliatory behaviour like FB "unfriendings", to live out the way of forgiveness and humility as Jesus taught is truly remarkable.... just as it was back in Jesus day.

If we took Jesus teaching to heart this year and truly tried to implement this teaching in Matthew 18 I wonder what might happen this year, in you, in our midst, in our world?

I close with a story adapted from a story I first read in Scott Peck's book A Different Drum

The church of the reluctant disciples once was a thriving congregation, but had fallen on hard times.

The congregation had dwindled to a handful of members who continued to meet for worship. The minister engaged a consultant who surveyed the situation, and met after worship on Sunday. He said, many faith communities are having the same experience. "Times have changed, the ways of doing things have changed. No way forward is certain. I have only one suggestion, Jesus said where 2 or three agree I am with them".

what if Jesus is with you whenever you meet with each other? Would that change how you act?"

The congregation thought a little bit. They were not sure that the help they needed had been given....

But the next Sunday when they passed the Peace of Christ, they did so as if Jesus was watching. During the week they began to treat each other with more respect as Jesus had taught. They were careful how they spoke about others and the congregation, as if Jesus was listening. They began to address old hurts and seek forgiveness and ways forward as Jesus had taught. They began to notice the good things happening in their midst and enjoyed their time of being together. Visitors to the building started to comment on the extraordinary care with which they were treated. It didn't happen overnight, but the outsiders began to talk about how this congregation seemed to act on what they said they believed.

As they worked together, others joined them in their projects and their programs to find they each were treated as if they belonged.

And God's presence was known in the way they treated each other and trusted God's way above others. Instead of a dying church it became a place of hope and life for the congregation and the community. I wonder what this has to say to us today?