

Proper 18A – September 7, 2014
Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Jesus' advice on how to handle disputes between members of the Body may sound cumbersome and insular, especially to those of us who, as Barbara Brown Taylor put it, "would rather just erase someone out of our address books and go on as if nothing had ever happened. [But] the point here is not to avoid conflict [nor to precisely sort out who is right and who is wrong] but [rather] to do everything possible to keep Christ's Body [- the Church family -] in one piece. If it does not work, Jesus says, 'let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector'—but what can that mean? The Canaanite woman was one, and Matthew himself was the other [- those were precisely the ones Jesus himself ends up reaching out to]. [So,] even those who get kicked out are welcome back in whenever they can get their acts together."ⁱ

Such reconciliation that Jesus is calling for requires direct encounter: first, "go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." That could include a letter or email or phone call with a hoped-for response. Jesus, in fact, recommends face-to-face. That's the real meaning of *confrontation*—front-with-front—face-to-face. Now many who are conflict-averse would want to avoid that first step at all costs. As Taylor puts it, "The excuses rush to our lips. Who am I to judge? What is it to me? *Me* go to her? *She* is the [offender]; let *her* come to *me*. Tell him my feelings are hurt? What if he just hurts them again? I would not know what to say. I would feel so foolish. And what's the use, anyhow? Things will never change."ⁱⁱ She adds,

"Those are all fine excuses...but for those of us who are called to Christian community, they just will not do. For us, there is something more important than being right or wrong, and that something is keeping the family together. For us the real problem is not the brother or sister who sins against us but [rather] our own fierce wish to defend ourselves against them regardless of the cost. The real problem is the speed with which most of us are ready to forsake our relationships in favor of nursing our hurt feelings, our wounded pride. In old fashioned language, the problem is how eager we are to repay sin with more sin.

[According to our gospel] there is another way, apparently, an alternative to putting distance between ourselves and those with whom we are in conflict. We can go to them, Jesus says, and tell them what is wrong, or what we think is wrong, because the best way to end a fight is to admit that we too might be wrong. There are certain questions to be asked, like: Am I sure I know what I am talking about? Have I given the other person every benefit of the doubt? What are my motives in confronting her with my feelings? Do I want to make him feel bad, or do I really want peace? What am I afraid of? Is the relationship worth the risk? That last question is a very important one, because the only reason to take Jesus' advice at all is to win back a relationship that is in danger of being lost. Once you have decided that is what you want, it helps to remember that you are working *for* the relationship, not *against*

it; that your real goal is *reconciliation*, not *retribution*, and that being right is less important to you than being in relationship.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So, if you are able to proceed to the step of calling, emailing, writing or simply showing up at the other person’s door, you are doing something that will be a step in the right direction. Again, Taylor adds, “If this is not something you are eager to do, do not let that stop you; there is not a word in today’s reading about wanting to reach out to your brother or sister. Just go, it says, and try to gain the relationship back.”^{iv}

Now, not for every grievance can this work, necessarily, for example, in situations where significant power differentials exist between the parties involved, which can make it even more unsafe for victim to confront victimizer, for example, when harm is done to a child, or some other types of misconduct occur in church or involve church members and/or staff; or there occur various forms of violence, or other criminal behavior, or larger injustices that may split a congregation right down the middle.^v The additional steps that Jesus outlines—going with another, taking it to the whole Body—may be a way to do a form of restorative justice that puts offended and offender and the wider community back in right relationship; but that still is not the solution for all offenses or injustices, as I’ve mentioned. Some offenses require removal of the offender and, at times, even the offended from the community; although that doesn’t mean that some form of eventual forgiveness and even face-to-face reconciliation and re-incorporation can’t happen somewhere in the future.^{vi}

We also know that the peace sought by too early a reconciliation can come at the expense of justice or truth and can involve an accommodation and capitulation to the imbalance of power and the injustice. But although reconciliation is not the first step in many struggles for peace with justice on a personal or societal basis, that doesn’t mean that the seeds of reconciliation can’t be sown all along the way during the conflict. For example, simply listening to the other person or other side’s point of view is a seed sown for reconciliation. Such listening does not prevent an effective way of addressing your just case against injustice; rather, it has you enter into a process of opening yourself to the humanity of the other side, truly hearing and trying to understand. This involves touching a little of the fear, the hopes, the confusion, the feelings, and even the goodness of people who could easily be perceived as your enemy. In doing so, such listeners find their personal and public work for justice (for themselves or others) is not weakened, but, in fact, is strengthened. Compassion and the fight for truth and justice can walk hand in hand. Furthermore, sowing the seeds of reconciliation through listening even in the midst of big struggles rests on the belief that the Spirit of God exists in each and every person. It may be buried deep, but it is there somewhere.^{vii}

As he concludes his advice on resolving conflict and keeping His Body one, Jesus states: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). With all this in mind, our parish and city and nation gather again for a time of remembrance and hope on the thirteenth anniversary of the tragic events of 9/11. We gather together and *remember*—through the God-given attitude of *hope*—as we honor all

whose lives were lost, and all whose hearts were broken on that day, whose hearts were broken, *open*.

It's going to take a lot longer even than the thirteen years we've had to incorporate and fully integrate the horror of September 11th 2001 into our collective experience. Yet, seeds of hope, sparks found in the ashes have begun to emerge. For many who lost loved ones and for many others the horror was so complete that it may well move them to...compassion. For many of us such compassion begins with the realization that in 9/11, we shared in one catastrophic moment some of the very everyday experiences and insecurities and horrors of those living in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza and Israel, and so many other places. As we have experienced or witnessed this horror not only as individuals and families, but also as a nation, we realize that other individuals and whole communities are mistreated and made victims of horrendous violence.

In these experiences, nobody escapes being wounded.^{viii} We are all wounded people – broken open physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main concern then is not how we can hide or get “beyond” our woundedness so as to “get on with life.” Rather, what we are learning is how we can put our woundedness and vulnerability in the service of others through heart-to-heart connections.^{ix} When our woundedness and vulnerability cease to be a source of shame or embarrassment or anger or fear, and become a source of healing and connection, and even forgiveness, enabling us to share one another's burdens, we then become “wounded healers” and seeds of hope for others.^x

A stanza in the Leonard Cohen song, *Anthem*, reads, “Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.” - and that's how the light gets out, when our hearts have been cracked open. So this is a time of remembrance and hope; and God's gift of hope is present even when our worst fears have been realized - when our hearts are broken, open. Our worst fears were realized that morning thirteen years ago - and in so many places around the world since then – and yet, it is God hoping in us; therefore that hope will not disappoint.^{xi}

The only way I know of trying to make sense out of a senseless world is by making it relational - seeking a hopeful way forward, seeking to build bonds of our common humanity.^{xii} We clearly still have a long way to go.^{xiii} Yet, as Jesus put it, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” God is nearer even than our breath and closer than our hands and feet, calling on us to cling to God and one another even as we sigh, or scream – or strike back – at the senselessness of such violence. And there *are* these seeds of hope sown by God in each of our hearts - compassion, hope, connection, and vulnerability - discovered in the midst of our worst fears being realized, and cracked open in the fires of tragedy, and now growing. As Elie Wiesel stated, “We must look for hope - as a Great Hasidic master said, ‘If you look for the spark, you will find it in the ashes.’”^{xiv} With God's hope and purpose and power guiding us, may God bless us all.

ⁱ Clayton L. Morris and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Worship and Preaching That Work For Evangelism* (New York: Episcopal Church Center, 1992), p. 72. Taylor goes on to point out that,

“In his book, The Great Divorce, the British write C. S. Lewis paints a picture of hell...[that] bears resemblance...to where many human beings live. Hell is like a vast, gray city, Lewis says, a city inhabited only at its outer edges with rows and rows of empty houses in the middle, empty because everyone who once lived in them has quarreled with the neighbors and moved, and quarreled with the new neighbors and moved again, leaving empty streets full of empty houses behind them. That, Lewis says, is how hell got so large—empty at the center and inhabited only on the fringes—because everyone in it chose distance instead of confrontation as the solution to a fight” (Barbara Brown Taylor, The Seeds of Heaven (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1990), p. 62).

ⁱⁱ Taylor, The Seeds of Heaven, *Ibid.*, p. 62.

ⁱⁱⁱ Taylor, *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63. This is all compounded by the fact that the Church itself—like one’s own family—is made up of people with personalities and perspectives that are not all the same, and may, in fact be quite different from your own. As former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold put it, “I am put in mind of the Archbishop’s [of Canterbury] observation...that in Baptism we are bound together in “*solidarities not of our own choosing*.” Communion is costly and difficult to live in the concrete, and it is impossible to do so without the love, which is the very life of the Trinity, being poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Frank Griswold, “A Word to the Church” (New York: Episcopal News Service, July 11, 2006 - http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/3577_76638_ENG_HTML.htm)).

^{iv} Taylor, *Ibid.*, p. 63.

^v ...as churches have been divided over war and peace issues, or racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.

^{vi} It is also important to state that not every community is capable of facilitating the steps of conflict resolution stated by Jesus in this gospel (besides today’s gospel, see also Matthew 5:23-24); or as stated similarly by St. Paul (See 1 Corinthians 6:1-8). And that’s because—even when the church community is imbued with a “spaciousness of spirit” and has a culture whereby issues could be solved fairly and compassionately—some offenses that need to be resolved have to involve authorities and professionals outside the community (at the diocesan or even national level, and with secular/civil authorities), especially if they involve more serious criminal behavior. And it is also because a number of communities where such “Biblical processes” for conflict resolution have been employed have been communities that are very conservative and controlling/authoritarian, without a lot of “spaciousness of spirit” (See Mark Oppenheimer, “An Argument to Turn to Jesus Before the Bar” in *The New York Times*, February 28, 2014). Having said that, I have seen such conflict resolution processes as Jesus recommended work well—both fairly and lovingly—in several faith communities, and have had opportunities to practice this myself. It’s also worth looking at how different faith communities more or less practice this same process effectively—again, both fairly and lovingly—who are not Christian, for example, in the *Beit din*, or Jewish court (Oppenheimer, *Ibid.*), and various practices in the Buddhist tradition. (See Thich Nhat Hanh, Being Peace (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987), pp. 74-79).

Unity is good, division is bad—right? In fact, for better or worse, division has been a feature of Christianity from its beginning. Jesus himself constantly confronted and corrected misinterpretations among his own followers, and different interpretations of Jesus’ life and mission caused early Christian communities to fragment from their mother Judaism and then from each other. The truth is, division is not only inherent to our faith, it may actually be essential to it. So until Jesus comes again to definitively and universally establish the reign and peace of God, the specter of division will confront those who follow him. Faced with this abiding challenge, it is put upon the community of faith—all of us—to struggle with the paradox that those who work for the God of Love will engender enmity and hatred; and those who work for the Prince of Peace and Justice will also be the occasion of conflict and division. A creative tension, then, exists between the desire for reconciliation and the often divisive struggle for truth or justice.

^{vii} As Njongonkulu Ndungane, former Archbishop of Capetown, South Africa put it,

“We must recognize as brothers and sisters in Christ those who call on Jesus as their Lord. We may think they are wrong on various issues, but that is different from doubting their sincerity, the

validity of their faith or their membership in the body of Christ. As Paul tells the Corinthians, we know there is vast diversity within Christ's body – so vast it is likely to stretch our understanding of legitimate faith to the limit, just as seeing is incomprehensible to the ear, or hearing to the eye (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:14ff). It is God alone who decides who is a member of Christ's body, among those who claim to follow him. We must wrestle with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, encouraging one another in pursuit of the truth; and if any of us are misguided in our sincerity, we too can trust Gamaliel's words to the Sanhedrin: 'If this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow [it]' (Acts 5:38, 39)." (Njongonkulu Ndungane, "The Heartlands of Anglicanism" (Capetown, July 10, 2006)).

Barbara Brown Taylor concludes,

"In a lot of ways, it is a real nuisance to belong to a family. It would be so much easier if we were just a bunch of individuals, loosely bound by similar beliefs but whose affairs remained an essentially private matter between us and God. But according to Jesus, there is no such thing as privacy in the family of God. Our life together is the chief means God has chosen for being with us, and it is of ultimate importance to God. Our life together is the place where we are comforted, confronted, tested and redeemed by God through one another. It is the place where we come to know God or to flee from God's presence, depending on how we come to know or flee from one another.

When someone crosses us, we are called to be the first to reach out—even when we are the ones who have been hurt, even when God knows we have done nothing wrong, even when everything in us wants to fight back—still we are called to community with one another, to act like the family we are. That is how we know God and how God knows us. That is what we are called to do: to confront and make up, to forgive and seek forgiveness, to heal and be healed—to throw a block party smack in the deserted center of hell and fill the place with such music and laughter, such merriment and mutual affection that all the far flung residents come creeping in from their distant outposts to see what the fuss, the light, the *joy* is all about" (Taylor, *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64).

^{viii} As one observer put it,

"The wound as opening is a gateway to potential transformation... Collective wounds, like the World Wars, or the Holocaust, or the 9/11 disaster [or the events of Good Friday] are intentionally kept open by memory and memorial as a means of illumination, mourning and conscious reflection... We must look into a wound, not neglect or evade it. A wound has to be evaluated, attended to, cleansed, perhaps knit together or gently probed. [If not done,] wounds are subject to infection, and can fester and poison the integrity of the whole." (Quoted in "Wound" in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., [The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images](#) (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 734).

^{ix} The tragic events of 9/11 have wounded us all and have thrown us back on the infinite resources of God, having us recognize our dependence on God, and our interdependence with one another and the wider human race.

^x As Thornton Wilder put it,

"Without your wounds where would your power be? It is your melancholy that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men and women. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In Love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve." (Thornton Wilder, "The Angel that Troubled the Waters" (1928)).

^{xi} It's that hope that Jim Wallis speaks of when he says, "The principal vocation of religious communities in the public square is not to bring their dogma, but to bring the one thing you must have if you're going to

change your neighborhood, your city, your nation, or your world. That's the dynamic and power and promise of hope." (Jim Wallis et al., "Fundamentalism and the Modern World" in *Sojourners* magazine (Washington: D.C., March-April 2002)).

^{xii} In the case of 9/11, a powerful curiosity in "the other" has been stirred, a seeking of what informs and motivates those of different faith traditions, socio-political and national backgrounds; how they look at reality and define themselves in relation to us. This curiosity, this way of trying to make sense out of a senseless world by making it relational, is a hopeful way forward in seeking to build bonds of our common humanity.

^{xiii} Yet, it is only when we reach some common ground that we are on holy ground. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan spoke a few years ago at a conference sponsored by Trinity Church here in New York at which the speakers were asked to "name evil," something which politicians and evangelists seem so able to do these days. Annan said, "If we are intent on naming evil...let us name it intolerance. Let us name it as exclusion. Let us name it as a false assumption that we have nothing to learn from beliefs and traditions different from our own" (Kofi Annan, speech delivered to the National Conference of the Trinity Institute (New York: Trinity Church, May 2, 2004)).

Sure, our God is a God of justice. Yet, as William Sloane Coffin put it, "True, [if we love the good,] we have to hate evil; else we're sentimental. But if we hate evil more than we love the good, we just become damn good haters, and of those the world already has too many" (William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 20).

^{xiv} The New England Holocaust Memorial website. Friends of the New England Holocaust Memorial. 4 Dec. 2001. <<http://www.henm.com/contents/dedication.html>>. (Quote by Elie Wiesel, dedication statement, 22 Oct. 1995).