

14th Sunday after Pentecost - August 25, 2024

Ruth 4:9–17; Psalm 107:1–9, 19–22; 1 Corinthians 12:14–26; Matthew 5:43–48

“Redefining Community”

1. When back-to-school time rolls around, it makes me think of the preparations needed to send our kids to school
 - a. I really enjoyed seeing back-to-school pictures on Facebook a couple of weeks ago.
 - b. Reminds me of when our boys were little, and we would wait for the school bus to take them to elementary school
 - i. We lived on Indy’s Near Eastside, our house was on a corner, and we would stand on our front sidewalk,
 1. our Golden Retriever Riley calmly hanging out with us,
 2. the boys practicing a routine from their weekly tap dance class.
 - ii. Ah, it was a simpler time. 12-14 years ago...
 1. Preparing them to go school, I’d encourage them :
 - a. Be willing to learn. Don’t get in trouble.
 - b. Enjoy daycare after school. Come home.
 2. Yes, there were challenges, and getting called in to go to the school when they did get in trouble was never my favorite
 3. Yes, there were the nights working on homework, but also nights going to a special activity – we were always doing something!
 - c. I try to remember what advice I gave the boys when they were getting ready for school.
 - i. I suppose it was: Work hard, pay attention, listen to your teacher
 - ii. And I probably said some version of “get along” “make some friends”
2. In today’s passage, Jesus was preparing the crowd for a new start – not for a new school year, but challenging them to rethink what God’s reign was all about
 - a. And the teaching was probably a bit shocking
 - b. So much so, that Jesus highlights it by creating this clear contrast: you’ve heard it said... but I say...
 - c. This passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with the beatitudes
 - i. Blessed are the peacemakers
 - ii. blessed are the meek etc
 - d. And the Sermon on the Mount includes instructions like in today’s passage, where it upends what were considered agreed-upon norms
 - i. In the passage right before this one, Jesus says: you’ve heard it said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you.. if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.
 1. An “eye for an eye” was meant to be a way to offer justice – meaning that retaliation would not get out of hand
 2. But there Jesus was trying to interrupt the cycle of retaliation altogether – giving no room for escalation
 - ii. Then come today’s verses: you all have heard that it was said: love your neighbor and hate your enemy, yet I say to you all: love your enemy.
 - iii. I can just imagine how these lines landed, making people uncomfortable – after all, he was a really respected teacher and healer, so he must be on to something, but... THIS?? How does this even work?!

- e. For us reading the passage 2000 years later, it could be tempting to think: well, those were simpler times! People were more gracious! They were not as divided as we are today!
 - i. Well, guess again.
 - ii. I've spoken recently about the political tension experienced by the folks in occupied Palestine living under the thumb of the Roman empire
- f. So, if it wasn't necessarily easier for them to wrap their heads around this than it would be for us today, they would have heard what Jesus had to say with some level of suspicion or caution
- g. So I suggest we also proceed with some caution ourselves
 - i. There are three words that would be important to highlight
 - 1. Love, enemy and perfect.
 - ii. The word Jesus uses for love here is the highest type of love (as expressed in the Greek language) – Agape, which is shown by God, and which the scripture would argue we humans are capable of showing as well
 - iii. But loving a neighbor or a loved one is one thing. It's quite another to love an enemy – someone who is hostile towards us
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2190/kjv/tr/0-1/>
 - iv. In this passage Jesus says that loving someone who already loves you back is easy, but that it is not enough.
 - v. So Jesus gives a way to engage that task – by first praying for those enemies
 - 1. This isn't necessarily an easier challenge, but at least it offers a point of connection which feels like a good entry into loving them
 - vi. And then, the passage concludes by saying: be perfect like God is perfect
 - vii. Perfect in this context means “brought to its end, finished, mature”
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5046/kjv/tr/0-1/>
 - 1. So not only are we to love our enemies but we're asked to be perfect like God? Right...
 - 2. Well, what Jesus is asking is that we reach that sense of maturity which God wants for us
- h. All this feels like a tall order. So tall, in fact, that I wonder how many of us even attempt it.
 - i. I don't say that in judgement. I certainly struggle with this mandate.
 - ii. But maybe this being the new school year start can give us a good lens to consider Jesus' lesson,
 - iii. so if we think of Jesus' sermon as something which he is teaching us and helping us prepare for, then it's not like we're being asked to be ready for the final test on the first day of school.
- i. After all, in this sermon on the mount, Jesus is shaking up the entire religious understanding of what being part of the community of God really means
 - i. He is redefining what community is about
 - ii. He is laying down the basic structure of how the community of people under God's authority, the reign of God, would function
 - iii. It is a fresh start.
 - iv. Think about how disarming it would be if enemies knew that God expected that they love each other. And pray for each other.
 - v. I imagine it's hard to remain enemies if instead of feeding the grudge and rancor, we feed the gap with love and a desire to make peace

3. Taking seriously Jesus' mandate to redefine community in this way, consider what living into Jesus' challenging message of loving our enemies could look like, one person at a time, one situation at a time
 - a. Remember: we can't ace the final exam on the first day of school
 - b. One clue we have in the passage to get us to the standard Jesus presents is this: Getting to love may come via prayer
 - i. For years, when I prayed the Lord's Prayer, I pictured a particular person in the part when we pray "as we forgive our debtors" (or as other traditions say "as we forgive those who trespass against us / who sin against us")
 - ii. Let's just say it was a struggle for me to get to the forgiving part for that individual
 - iii. I wouldn't say I hated that person – that's way too strong – nor would I say they were my enemy, but they had a place in my heart where I couldn't really let them go in a healthy way
 - iv. So I just kept letting the Lord's prayer work on ME – not on them, but ME
 - v. Slowly but surely they faded into the background. I could let them go. I could begin to realize I was forgiving them.
 - vi. Imagine how that could work if I pictured in my prayers someone who ACTIVELY comes after me – whether me personally or who lives their life from a racist worldview which sees me as an enemy – and they a threat to me.
 - vii. I'm working on that...
 - c. Getting to love means we're getting closer to maturity (being perfect as God is perfect, as the passage says)
 - i. Getting to love may feel particularly difficult in this era of polarized politics, but what I'm telling you is that it isn't new
 - ii. Getting to love was then and still is something which God is calling us to, AND something God equips us for (if we're willing to receive it) AND something God offers us a way to (if we're willing to have prayer work on us)
 - d. It's insufficient to bemoan the divisions we encounter and throw our hands up in frustration or disgust.
 - e. It's insufficient to wait for the other side (or the other person) to see the light and come to our side (which of course is the right side!)
 - f. Jesus is calling us to love, and calling us out for our reluctance to love. And as we seek to live into that call, the shifts in community will happen, and the fruit of that daring, contrarian, risky love will become apparent. Even as we do so imperfectly, tentatively.
4. Jesus tells us: Love your enemies, one prayer at a time. Change your community, change yourself, one step at a time

Sources

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-538-48>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-538-48-2>