

Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring, VA
13th Sunday after Pentecost
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God did not intend for us to be alone. Rather, God calls us into community, to live and work, to study and pray, to break bread and to play with others. From the very beginning, it was God's plan for us human beings to have companions and to live in community with them. In the second Creation story in Genesis, Adam is set in the beautiful Garden of Eden. Everything is in place, but God notices how alone Adam is. God says, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a helper as his partner." And God created Eve. Jesus also lived out God's plan that we should not be alone. Yes, he needed—and he claimed—his time apart. The Gospels recount many times Jesus withdrew from the crowds, even from his friends, to be alone, to pray. But his was not a solo ministry. He called others to share in his mission and ministry—the disciples, Mary and Martha of Bethany, Mary Magdalene. Jesus was most often found among the people—teaching the crowds, healing the sick, sharing table fellowship with saints and sinners alike. It is not good that we should be alone.

And yet, when we live and move and have our being with other people, there are challenges. Beginning with the very first generation, we human beings have had trouble living together. We all know what happened with Adam and Eve. She tempted him to eat the forbidden fruit, and he blamed her for his transgression. The trouble only got worse with the next generation. Their son Cain killed his brother Abel in a jealous rage. God had looked with favor on Abel's offering but had no regard for his. It is not good that we should be alone, but living together can be so hard. Just ask Jacob and Esau.

We, too, know the joys and the frustrations of living with other people. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel might have been the first family with difficulties, but they certainly weren't the last. Those of us who have siblings—or who parent siblings—know firsthand this phenomenon called sibling rivalry. In some cases, the childhood animosity does give way to close friendship in adulthood. Thankfully, that was the case for my sister and me. I can still remember drawing a line down the middle of the room we shared and a similar line down the backseat of the car. "Don't even think about coming over to my side!" (Do I need to mention I am the older sister?) I remember our fighting reducing my Mom, who was an only child, to tears. "I would have given anything for a sister, and all you two do is fight." Sadly, the sibling rivalry can return in later years. One sibling doesn't think the family inheritance was divided fairly. Or another sibling ended up with the lion's share of care for the elderly parent. Families remind us of the advantages of not being alone. They also remind us of the challenges that come with sharing love and loyalty, affection and favor, space and chores. Families can bring out the best in us; they can also bring out the worst.

In many ways congregations are families. One of the hardest parts of retiring for me was leaving the community of St. Anne's. Over the thirteen years, we had become family. I can see you at Holy Cross are family as well. We gather in a beautiful house of worship, we share a meal, and we share in the work it takes to keep the family running. I haven't been among you long enough to know for sure, but my guess is that most of the time, most of you enjoy the companionship. You are comfortable in this nurturing environment; it is a good place for you to stretch and grow. Again, I haven't been here long enough to know, but unless you are unlike all other church families, I can guess there have been times the community has broken down. We human beings can focus on our own needs. We can get pretty invested in our way of doing things. We can grow frustrated with other members of the community. We can let small hurts go unaddressed because it's easier that way—in the short run. But in the long run, those small wounds left to fester can grow so large they can poison the relationship. A broken relationship can infect the whole community. Living in a family, living in community is both a blessing and a challenge—as we all well know.

All of today's lessons provide guidelines for the challenging task of living in community. They talk about how to live together, how to care for one another, how to be in communion with others, and how to resolve our differences **when**—not if, but when—they arise. There is a prayer in our marriage service that I like to point out to couples as they prepare for marriage. "Give them grace when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault, and to seek each other's forgiveness and yours." The writers of our Prayer Book knew, and our lessons today confirm the fact that we cannot live together in perfect harmony all the time. If we spend enough time together, we will step on one another's toes. We will hurt each other. But we cannot live this life of faith alone. Today's lessons remind us our faith is not a private affair; it is not a solo activity. Yes, we do need time to be alone with God, just as Jesus did. But our life of faith is not about going off by ourselves to be holy. Our life in Christ is a community affair. Jesus told us it is when we are gathered two or three together that he will be in the midst of us. So we need to learn to live together. Today's lessons give us wisdom on how we might do that.

It was Ezekiel's responsibility to warn the people of Israel of their need to repent, to turn from their wicked ways. The job of turning rested with the people, but it was Ezekiel's job to point out their need for it. In our culture that places such value on independence and individualism and privacy, I wonder how many people have the courage to take on the role of Ezekiel. It's easier to look the other way. It's especially hard to speak truth to power. I wonder whether any of the McDonnells' staff or family saw they were accepting gifts deemed inappropriate and considered talking to them about it. When we see a community member doing something immoral, our job, like Ezekiel's is to point out—with humility—the wrong and the need to change. And that is not easy. Ezekiel reminds us God wants us to change; God does not delight in punishment and downfall.

Jesus also urges us to confront the wrong in our midst. If you have a problem with your brother or sister, (and that really is a more accurate translation—the family language has been lost in the translation) talk to him or her privately. Try to work it out among the two of you. This portion of Matthew’s Gospel is telling us how to be church. Today’s passage is one of only two in the Gospels (and the other one is two chapters back in Matthew) that uses the word *ecclesia*—church. It reminds us that people haven’t changed much in two thousand years. Those who love and care for one another can still hurt each other. And even with all our family systems theory and psychological insights, it seems that it isn’t any easier now than it was then to talk about those hurts. I notice that it is the one who has been wronged who initiates the conversation. I notice, too, that the goal is for the other to listen, not necessarily to admit wrongdoing. If the steps Jesus has outlined don’t work, only then are we instructed to treat the one who has hurt us like a Gentile or tax collector.

Treat the offender like a Gentile and tax collector? What does that mean? At first, we might assume that means to treat that person like an outsider, to ban them from the community. In the Jewish culture of Matthew’s day, Jews didn’t associate with Gentiles, and tax collectors were notoriously dishonest. But, Matthew, the writer of this Gospel, was himself a tax collector when Jesus called him. Zaccheus was also a tax collector, and Jesus went to his home for dinner. Matthew’s Gospel placed great emphasis on going into **all** the world—the Gentile world as well as the Jewish world—to draw people into the family. How did Jesus behave towards Gentiles and tax collectors? He sought them out, he ate dinner with them, he invited them to share in his mission and ministry. This passage comes right between the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the instruction to Peter that he must forgive his neighbor seventy times seven. I’m a bit confused by this, but I don’t think Jesus’ instruction is to cast people out of the community. God does not want even one to be lost. The family isn’t complete without him or her.

For the past few summers we have had the joy of taking our older grandchildren to St. George’s Camp at Shrine Mont, the camp their parents, our children, attended. During the week to ten days of the camp session, the campers and counselors are community. For the entire session they are grounded in the passage from Paul, “You are the Body of Christ.” Each member is valued, each member is honored, each member is needed. This is a radical change for many of the campers who have known what it feels like to be excluded, to be teased, to be bullied. What if we could practice that in our faith communities? Wouldn’t it be great if we could pass it along to our schools, our neighborhoods, our workplaces? Perhaps it can be with us.

This business of confronting the hurt is never easy, but it can have a powerful outcome. A woman in a parish I served had become very angry about a decision not to provide childcare for an evening program. I was a big part of that decision. She vented her anger in some inappropriate ways, and I didn’t listen to her.. Later that week she came to me and said, “I can’t go to Communion until I tell you how sorry I am for the way I acted towards you.” It’s been over twenty-five years now, but I am still overwhelmed when I recall it. I so admire her courage

to seek me out and say, “I’m sorry. I don’t want this rift between us to continue. I confess my role in it and ask your forgiveness.”

As we gather at God’s table this morning, we come as family, seeking communion with God and with one another. And we come renewing our commitment to seek reconciliation with all God’s children, to include all God’s children. Amen.