



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Life Together

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 10, 2017
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 18:15-20*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.
Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our hearts and see through them.
Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen.*

Wow, what a week! There was even an article on the front page of the Times yesterday openly addressing people's fears that we are facing the end of days (And you know it's serious when the New York Times is interviewing theologians!). Wildfires in the Northwest. A deadly earthquake in Mexico. Texas and Louisiana still struggling with flood waters left by Hurricane Harvey, and this morning Hurricane Irma headed for Florida after a devastating run through the Caribbean.

This follows no ordinary summer here in the United States, where we saw racists openly marching in Charlottesville, Virginia, while shouting anti-Semitic chants. There is increasing evidence the Soviet Union successfully interfered with the presidential election process, and North Korea is now boasting they possess a hydrogen bomb.

This is a little like the "All You Can Eat Seafood Buffet" for preachers: You know you'd like to sample it all, but you just don't know exactly where to begin.

Perhaps one place to begin is to highlight what others have already noted: These challenges and catastrophes often reveal humanity at our very best. Challenges and catastrophes never define us but they often reveal us. We often see the church at its very best, working to help people in need. We see ordinary citizens acting without self-regard to help their fellow human beings.

These are the moments when we want to pull in tight with our family and closest friends, but so many of us now live far away from at least one member of our family. We have a son in Washington, D.C.; others have a daughter in Colorado or Los Angeles, and increasingly a child or two studies or works abroad. We all try to bridge the gap as best we can. Telecommunications companies remain profitable through our attempts to stay in regular touch. Children leave home for school. Parents may divorce and move to separate cities. Friends find jobs with companies that move them hither and yon. The intimate life of yesteryear, mostly lived in rural villages and small towns, has given way to a more anonymous manner of life, lived for the most part in larger urban areas like our city. One result of these phenomena is that a great many people feel quite alone and in need of a new family and a new community. For some of us gathered this morning in this place, this church functions as a sort of home away from home, a family of faith which nurtures and comforts and, like a family, sometimes provokes and even angers.

For those on the edges of our fellowship looking in, there's a temptation to romanticize this life in the faith community. They believe life in the church should be other-worldly somehow, and maybe just the slightest

bit insipid. Books and movies are filled with these images. In order to be a part of this new family, folks feel they must always be freshly showered, properly dressed, and without visible facial or emotional blemish. How different is the understanding Jesus had concerning life in community! Jesus knew life together would be messy.

I remember the Dean of my seminary reminding our incoming class at orientation that we had entered the gates of a graduate school and not the gates of heaven. If there was any confusion about that, he invited us to walk out and re-read the sign on the gate. His admonishment was intended to assist those who had come to seminary expecting some sort of idealized heaven on earth. He wanted to warn new students they had not escaped the nature of humanity when they stepped onto the grounds of the school. Seminaries, just like parishes, are not “an entirely different way of being,” and a few of my classmates found the Dean’s counsel prophetic. I used to warn people who were about to be confirmed that they could expect to be hurt by someone in the church.

So, if families are so important, and spiritual communities are a growing necessity in an increasingly fragmented world, how should we live together? What’s required of us? Where will we find instruction? Today’s lessons form an insightful faith response to these questions. And in hearing from one of the great Hebrew Prophets and the great New Testament evangelist Paul, followed by Christ’s own instructions, we might be able to learn something about how we should be together.

The prophet Ezekiel addresses the responsibilities of a prophet. The prophet, he says, is like a sentinel, a watchman for the community of faith. In ancient Palestine, these lookouts were familiar figures posted along the hilltops to warn of hostile invaders. As a villager, when you looked to the hills and saw the watchman on his solitary vigil, you breathed a small sigh of relief, because you knew your safety was ensured for the moment. The watchman would sound the alarm if there were the threat of danger. For Ezekiel, a prophet is to be the critical guardian of the people of faith.

But Ezekiel argues that the prophet must not only warn the society as a whole; he suggests the prophet must also speak directly with the individuals who comprise the community. Ezekiel knows there is an immediacy to the prophetic. Prophets need to work one-on-one, eye-to-eye. Speaking globally won’t be enough. Prophets must work side-by-side with the people they seek to transform with God’s truth. The prophet cannot be successful by merely standing on the hilltop and crying out predictions of destruction and doom. Someone—some one—must hear the prophet, and the prophet must seek them out.

Now, if the prophet, having been entrusted with this sacred responsibility, fails to sound the alarm when something’s amiss, then the responsibility for the righteousness of the entire community falls directly on the prophet’s head! The Apostle Paul expresses it this way: “Woe be unto me if I do not preach the gospel.” There’s a price to be paid when we do not speak the known truth. We are, each of us, called by God to speak truth to power. However, if the prophet speaks his inspired truth, if the prophetess delivers her dire warnings, and the individuals of the faith community refuse to hear it, then the prophet is relieved of his or her responsibility for the catastrophe that will inevitably follow.

In the gospel lesson taken from Matthew, we learn that through the power of Christ we all share in the gifts of the Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit call each of us to be prophets, responsible for caring for the vulnerable among us. As it turns out, everyone is called to take a turn walking the hills, standing watch, vigilant to the dangers that could wreck the community of faith.

What could shatter this parish? What dangers does our community face?

It was a dangerous world that Ezekiel lived in, and we’re not strangers to the power of evil, which holds the power to destroy us. We still depend upon prophets to protect us, and yet precisely because we depend upon them, we can sometimes despise them and focus our wrath upon them. Remember when Jesus said,

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.” (Matthew 23:37 NRSV) Psychologists call this “transference.”

I believe the Apostle Paul is one of the most enigmatic figures in scripture. I find in my teaching that people either love him or hate him. But this irascible tent-maker, who put his life on the line for the love of Christ, has written one of the most beautiful instructions for communal living I’ve ever read. In the twelfth chapter of his letter to the Church in Rome—a community of Christians he had not at that point personally met—he shares his vision for Life together. Scholar Norman Perrin suggests Paul’s Letter to the Romans is a sort of “last will and testament” that grew out of his anxiety in the face of the dangers he sensed in Jerusalem. If so, then his instructions on Christian living are even more grace-filled and hold an even greater urgency.

How should we live together? “Let your love be genuine. Hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Don’t lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.”

What should we do? “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. (And we can imagine the “strangers” of Paul’s time were every bit as strange as they are today in New York!)

How shall we act when the going gets tough? “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.”

What attitude should we take toward others? “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.”

How shall we respond to those who hate us? “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God.”

Are you sure? I mean these are our enemies we’re talking about here! “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. If your enemies are hungry...feed them. If they are thirsty...give them something to drink.”

So, how do you sum this up? “Don’t be overcome by evil”—don’t stoop to that level— “but overcome evil with good.” For Paul, the power of the good is a force with which to be reckoned.

In all sacred writings ever recorded, there is no more beautiful and no more radical imperative than the one that Paul presents here. This is how we are to live together. This is how our social interactions are to be governed. This is how we will become spiritual beings in the hands of a loving God. This is how we will work out our futures and lead others by our lives to see the grace and the gentle care of a Merciful Savior.

But what happens when things go wrong? What do we do when good people do bad things? It seems that organizations of every kind, including (and sometimes especially) churches, find healthy, accountable living an on-going challenge. I’ve said I’d like to write a book someday titled Dysfunction is Always Working for Someone. It’s true. When you witness dysfunctional behavior—the person who’s always threatening to resign, the person who uses their anger to silence or intimidate, the person who consistently acts abrasively or dishonestly with colleagues—you need to understand this behavior didn’t just suddenly appear. It is usually behavior that has worked and worked and worked for this person. I once said that I thought my main job as a bishop leading a diocese was to try to keep dysfunctional behavior from working.

In today’s Gospel, we find a virtual self-help guide concerning that age-old difficulty, dealing with conflict. Is someone causing divisiveness in this community? If someone has hurt you by their words or actions, Jesus says you must speak to them. The obligation is given to the one who has been injured. Is someone endanger

ing themselves or others? Jesus says you must speak to them, face-to-face, eye-to-eye, and in confidence. Quietly, one-on-one.

How many problems could be avoided, how much dysfunctionality could be re-routed, if we would only follow the instructions we've been given? What happened the last time someone wronged you at work? Or in this parish? What did you do? What happened the last time you observed someone doing something detrimental to our common life together? What did you do when you were hurt by the words or actions of a member of this parish?

The last time that happened to me, I responded immediately. I told somebody else about it! Well, that's a very human thing to do. In these moments, we become like children. "Mom, Dad, he's kicking me!" We have a problem with one person, but instead of confronting that person, we tell someone else! This is what family systems theorists call "triangulation," and it's devastating to the repair of broken relationships because so much of the energy for healing the situation is drained off to a third party!

Jesus understands problems need to be confronted face-to-face. But what if talking to the person in private doesn't work? You're to take one or two others along and try again. But what if that doesn't work? If a member refuses to listen, tell it to the church! (This, by the way, is one of only two times we see the word for church, *ecclesia*, used in this Gospel) But, what if that doesn't work? (Doesn't this remind you of Jesus' responses concerning offering forgiveness? How many times should I forgive someone? "Seventy times seven!" You keep going back...and back...and back again.)

Jesus understands the reality that not all conflicts can be resolved. Not everything can be worked out to the satisfaction of everyone. So, what does Jesus suggest? "Then let such a one be as a Gentile or a tax collector," as an unbeliever or a traitor." But Jesus quickly adds, "Truly, I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven, for where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am in the midst of them."

When I think of my family and how dearly I love them, it's easy to forget the struggles and the conflicts and, yes, the fights we've had to have in order to forge the relationships we now hold so precious. You see, intimacy is a dance that involves constant movement. Life together in the Christian family is not easy. Community living only looks uncomplicated from a distance. You can ask anyone who's ever lived in a monastery or convent. Yet, we've been called to be together with an intimacy that can both challenge and liberate.

You can find in the words of Ezekiel and in the words of Paul and in these teachings of Christ enlightened instruction which invites us to love one another and to go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit!
Amen.

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