



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Deacon, John Wirenius, *Deacon*

Love is the Fulfilling of the Law

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 6, 2020

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Matthew 18:15-20

"Open thou my lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise" (Ps. 51:15)

We New Yorkers generally have our own way of looking at things, and we aren't shy to claim the credit for the new ideas we bring to the rest of the country. So it will come as no surprise that the first Labor Day Parade in United States history was held in New York City. On September 5, 1882, 100,000 workers took unpaid time off and marched from City Hall to Union Square. That's what Town and Country Magazine says, and it's based in New York City, so that's good enough for me.

Earlier today I had the privilege of sharing with many of you what your deacon's day job is. I was able to describe for you my work as Chair of the New York State Public Employment Relations Board, and to explain that I see the work that we do as neither on behalf of organized labor nor of management. Rather, what we do is a model of reconciliation, of bringing about and maintaining functioning relationships. The task of reconciliation in the workaday world lends itself to thinking more deeply about what reconciliation can mean from a broader perspective. And certainly being in relationship, and the steps needed to stay in relationship, are core values in the Gospel reading today and in the reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans.

I know that my old boss, the late Jerry Lefkowitz, looked at it through the lens of his Jewish faith. From a story he told, that was pretty clear. A little background first: Around the time of Jesus, there were two notably different schools of thought within Judaism as to the law—the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai.

Jerry famously told a story about these two great sages. A pagan, considering converting to Judaism, asked Shammai to explain all of Judaism to him while standing on one foot. Shammai waved him away.

The pagan continued on until he saw Hillel, and asked him the same question: could Hillel explain the substance of Judaism—while standing on one foot? As Jerry related the story, Hillel raised one foot and quickly answered, "The substance of Judaism is to love thy neighbor as thyself. All the rest is procedural. Now you must go and study the procedures so as to be able to accomplish the substance."¹

Jerry then drew the parallel to our law, explaining that each public employee has the right to join or not join unions of their own choosing, and that their employers are required to negotiate with

¹ John F. Wirenius, "The Taylor Law at Fifty," in Wirenius, ed., THE TAYLOR LAW AT FIFTY: PUBLIC SECTOR LABOR RELATIONS IN A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE, at 3 (2019).

the chosen unions. He then echoed Hillel, saying, “All the rest is procedural.” When you study these procedures, the elements of reconciliation and relationship building become obvious.

What happens at the bargaining table, at the end of the day, is not about force. The law we administer forbids strikes by public employees, with severe penalties for the unions and strikers. Likewise, management is forbidden from making changes to contracts even after they have expired, unless those changes are negotiated to agreement or arbitration settles the matter.

Neither party has the power to force the other to agree to terms they think are unreasonable. Persuasion, argumentation, and sometimes the neutral assistance of skillful mediators result in an agreed on contract in over 85% of the bargaining units. In other words, what we do is about coming together and finding a way to live in relationship with each other.

Again, being in relationship, and the steps needed to stay in relationship, are core values in the Gospel reading today, and in the reading from Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

Jesus describes for us a series of conversations to try to effect reconciliation—first, between the offender and the injured party, then between them again, this time with witnesses, then finally with both parties, the witnesses to the last conversation, and the church. Only if the offender will not listen to the church is he to be treated as a Gentile and tax collector.

The steps outlined in the Gospel reading are *not* intended to be used to settle differences of opinion; they are invoked, in the NRSV translation we use, only “if another member of the church *sins* against you.” In another words, a brother or a sister acts unjustly toward you, specifically against you, as does pretty much every other reputable translation I can find.

And W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann in their *Anchor Bible* volume on Matthew underline that the purpose of this procedure is to encourage reconciliation. It is a multi-step, cooperative process that seeks redemption and renewal at every turn, and does not seek to exclude. Only in the last resort does Jesus allow for us to treat the offender as a “Gentile and a tax-collector”—that is, a non-member of the community and a sinful one at that.

And how do we treat the Gentile, and the tax collector? Well, Jesus ate with the tax collector Zacchaeus and called as a disciple the tax collector Matthew, for whom the Gospel, including this reading, is traditionally named. As for Gentiles, he was impressed by the faith of the Centurion, and even more so by the Canaanite woman, whose story we heard a few weeks ago, and who defeats him in argument, and humbly begs his aid.

Outside of Matthew’s Gospel, of course, Luke’s recounting of the parable of the Good Samaritan drives the point home: all people are our neighbors, every one of us is a child of God, and all of us are precious in God’s eye and in God’s heart. We are not called to dismiss anyone as having no worth or place in God’s Creation.

No, the goal of these pericopes is about being in relationship, staying in relationship, and finding ways to heal relationships that have broken down. That’s why the analogy to collective bargaining, reconciling different needs and views, to rebuilding and resolving more personal, more damaging disputes is just that—an analogy.

The presence of God in making all things new, in resurrecting love that has been battered seemingly beyond all recognition, is very different from the resolution of workplace differences. But the analogy is real, too—choosing cooperation over conflict, respect over enmity, are common

elements in both. And if these virtues exist in the mundane, well, then maybe that gives us hope for the more wrenching and damaging conflicts that can poison relationships and lead to embittered lives.

But in the Gospel, even in cases when we are sinned against, the penalty at the end of the process is not meant to be invoked lightly. Today's reading ends at verse 20.

In the very next verse, the very next sentence, Peter asks Jesus "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus says to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." The emphasis on forgiveness is even stronger in the *King James*; Jesus answers, "I say not unto thee until seven times; but until seventy times seven."

In other words, the very next passage makes it pretty clear that rejection of fellow Christians is not to be done lightly.

And, just in case the point hasn't been made clear enough, the rest of the chapter consists of Jesus telling the parable of the servant whose own debts were forgiven, but who would not forgive those he was owed.

The parable tells us that "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves." The king is confronted by a servant who owes the monumental sum of ten thousand talents. The servant begs for more time to pay, and the king, touched, forgives him the whole debt.

But the forgiven servant runs across another servant who owes him the paltry sum of a hundred denarii, and seizes him by the throat, and demands his money. When the other servant begs for more time to pay, the forgiven servant has him thrown into prison until he paid the debt. The king, on hearing how the forgiven slave has refused to show mercy himself, has him tortured until he pays the full debt. Jesus underlines the lesson, stating rather darkly that "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

So forgiveness is key to who we are as those who seek and strive to follow Christ. We all fall short; but we are all, as Nadia Bolz-Weber reminds us by way of Martin Luther, all sinners and all saints, fully both all the time. And even still, at our weakest and most hopeless, at our most unlovable and at our most wounded, we are loved, and forgiven by a God who longs to be in relationship with us, and to heal all of our divisions from one another.

And we have to do our part—forgive each other and accept forgiveness in our turn.

It's the way to heaven.

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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