



**Lower Susquehanna Synod
of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday, September 6, 2020

GATHERING

CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

Blessed be the holy Trinity, + one God,
who forgives all our sin, whose mercy endures forever.

Amen.

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another.

Gracious God,
have mercy on us. We confess that we have turned from you and given ourselves into the power of sin. We are truly sorry and humbly repent. In your compassion forgive us our sins, known and unknown, things we have done and things we have failed to do. Turn us again to you, and uphold us by your Spirit, so that we may live and serve you in newness of life through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

God, who is rich in mercy, loved us even when we were dead in sin, and made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved. In the name of + Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. Almighty God strengthen you with power through the Holy Spirit, that Christ may live in your hearts through faith.

Amen.

GATHERING SONG Gather Us In

1 Here in this place the new light is streaming, now is the darkness vanished away; see in this space our fears and our dreamings brought here to you in the light of this day. Gather us in, the lost and forsaken, gather us in, the blind and the lame; call to us now, and we shall awaken, we shall arise at the sound of our name.

2 We are the young, our lives are a myst'ry,
we are the old who yearn for your face;
we have been sung throughout all of hist'ry, called to be light to the whole human race.

Gather us in, the rich and the haughty,
gather us in, the proud and the strong;
give us a heart, so meek and so lowly,
give us the courage to enter the song.

3 Here we will take the wine and the water,
here we will take the bread of new birth,
here you shall call your sons and your daughters, call us anew to be salt for the earth.

Give us to drink the wine of compassion,
give us to eat the bread that is you;
nourish us well, and teach us to fashion lives that are holy and hearts that are true.

4 Not in the dark of buildings confining,
not in some heaven, light years away--
but here in this place the new light is shining, now is the kingdom, and now is the day.

Gather us in and hold us forever,
gather us in and make us your own;
gather us in, all peoples together,
fire of love in our flesh and our bone.

GREETING

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

And also with you.

HYMN OF PRAISE

Blessed Be Your Name FaithX

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Let us pray.

O Lord God, enliven and preserve your church with your perpetual mercy. Without your help, we mortals will fail; remove far from us everything that is harmful, and lead us toward all that gives life and salvation, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

WORD

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 33:7-11

A reading from Ezekiel.

⁷So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ⁸If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. ⁹But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

¹⁰Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" ¹¹Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked

turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Word of God, word of life.

Thanks be to God.

SECOND READING: Romans 13:8-14

A reading from Romans.

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Word of God, word of life.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL: Matthew 18:15-20

The holy gospel according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord.

Jesus said to the disciples: ¹⁵"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

SERMON

HYMN OF THE DAY All Are Welcome

1 Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live, a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive.

Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
rock of faith and vault of grace;
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:

Refrain

All are welcome, all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.

2 Let us build a house where prophets speak, and words are strong and true,
where all God's children dare to seek
to dream God's reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness
and as symbol of God's grace;
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus: **Refrain**

3 Let us build a house where love is found
in water, wine and wheat;
a banquet hall on holy ground
where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus,
is revealed in time and space;
as we share in Christ the feast that frees us: **Refrain**

4 Let us build a house where hands will reach beyond the
wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
and live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
bear the image of God's face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger: **Refrain**

5 Let us build a house where all are named, their songs
and visions heard
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words
within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter,
prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: **Refrain**

CREED

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.**

**On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,**

**he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and
he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Drawn together in the compassion of God, we pray for
the church, the world, and all those in need.

..... God of mercy,
hear our prayer.

All these things and whatever else you see that we need, we entrust to your mercy; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

PEACE

The peace of Christ be with you always.
And also with you.

THANKSGIVING

Let us pray.
O God of justice and love, we give thanks to you that you illumine our way through life with the words of your Son. Give us the light we need, awaken us to the needs of others, and at the end bring all the world to your feast; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory forever.
Amen.

LORD'S PRAYER

Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.**

SENDING

ANNOUNCEMENTS

BLESSING

The God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus.
Amen.

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The God of all grace ✝ bless you now and forever.
Amen.

DISMISSAL

Go forth into the world to serve God with gladness; be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honor all people; love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.
Thanks be to God.

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Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost *Bishop James S. Dunlop*

Don't just listen to the Sermon... Ponder how you can live it!

Use these questions as a starting point to dive deeper into the sermon each week. Can be used individually, with family and friends, or with your Life-group!

1. Does our individual sin affect the community? If so, in what ways?
2. Where have you experienced genuine community?
3. At times living in community can be uncomfortable and requires vulnerability, are we willing to live in that way together? What does that look like?
4. What is God's will for us in living with others?

This Matthew text is one of the beautiful texts in scripture. It reveals the nature of our life in the Christian community; how it is that we are to live with one another. And unfortunately, I think, it too often is used as a club. It becomes the grounds for punishment, and in the church, the model for excommunication. Here is how you throw someone out of the community of faith. And yet that is not at all the purpose.

This passage points to life together, to life in community. Is this not the thing to which Jesus points? When this ends with the beautiful passage as Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20 NRSV)

For those of us in the church, there is a parallel expression: where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, there is conflict. I remember a story that my mentor, Pastor Stewart Hardy, shared with me from his first congregation. There were two more mature members of the congregational council. For the sake of this story, we will call them Hans and Otto, good Pennsylvania Dutch gentlemen, perhaps a bit set in their ways and a bit opinionated. They often seemed to be the 'nay' votes on new ideas in the congregation. However, there was one idea on which they did agree. They agreed that there needed to be a light in the parking lot of the church. Otto thought it was such a good idea that he was willing to fund the light. Hans was chair of the property committee and agreed to install it.

The problem was Otto thought that the light should be on a pole on the far side of the lot and Hans thought that it would be far easier to just put it on the building. Otto paid for the light, but Hans, as property chair, installed it on the building. Otto was furious that it was not installed properly on a pole. So, after a week or two, Otto hired some contractors, and they came and put in the pole and moved the light. Later, Hans came during the night and moved it back to the building. This went on for some time. Eventually, someone came to Pastor Hardy and said, "You need to step in." Pastor Hardy observed that while they were moving the light around so many other things were moving forward in the congregation because Hans' and Otto's attention was completely on the light.

Where two or three are gathered, there is conflict. People who are outside of the church often criticize the

church because of conflict and poor behavior by those of us in the church. The expression often heard is that church members are hypocritical. Yes, the church is full of sinners. And here is the thing, Jesus knew this. Why else do we have this teaching – a teaching on how to deal with sin, conflict, and brokenness in the church? The important thing is to hear what Jesus is saying about conflict and brokenness and how to deal with it. Not that there will never be conflict, but how in a loving Christian community do we deal with it?

The important thing to hear first is that Christianity is done in community and the community cares for the least, the lost, and the lonely. You know this from Jesus' teaching immediately in front of this lesson. Jesus warns anyone who would cause an innocent child, in their vulnerability, to stumble they would be better off thrown into the sea with a millstone around their neck. Then the next teaching is about the 100 sheep and one of them is lost. The good shepherd goes off to find the one.

We live in a culture that places high value on the individual and individual freedom. We are grateful that Jesus watches out for each of us individually. Yet that is not how the story is often heard in places like Africa where community is valued above all else. They hear that story as the shepherd who is willing to risk their life to find the one and restore the community. Perhaps that is closer to what the early teaching of the church was about – the importance of community.

We often say things from an individual freedom perspective, "It is my life and I can do what I want;" "I am free, this is the land of the free." But that is not what this lesson says. Our individual sins impact the community. Our being lost is a break in the community. It is a tear in the fabric of the community. Our choices impact the people around us, our family, our community. The commandments are about relationships with God and one another, most are about our relationship with one another.

Luther talked about our freedom eloquently when he said, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Freed by faith, which is a gift of God's mercy, a dutiful servant to all because we live and care for our neighbor in community.

Jesus, here in Matthew's gospel, gives us a clear process to resolve sin, brokenness, and conflict. The key is restorative justice. There are two kinds of justice: punitive justice and restorative justice. Punitive justice, you do something wrong and you are punished. That is the problem when this text is used as the way to throw someone out of the community. It is punishment.

But look how this passage is structured. If someone sins, you go and speak to them one-on-one privately, with the hope of restoring the relationship. To speak, and more importantly, to listen. To work to restore the relationship and the community.

I know that you will find this hard to believe that occasionally people call the bishop's office to complain about their deacon or pastor. I listen carefully, and the first question I ask is, "Did you go and talk to your pastor or deacon?" Most times the answer is, "No." By now they have complained to lots of other people. Generally, these complaints occur in what I call the parking lot meetings –

the meeting after the meeting out in the parking lot of the church.

To go and have an honest conversation with someone one-on-one can be uncomfortable. Welcome to Christian community. If Jesus was willing to die on the cross, are we willing to have uncomfortable conversations for the sake of one another? If you are not, then you do not live in community but rather pseudo-community or false community, a community filled with empty smiles and fake niceness.

And what if the one does not accept your assessment of the situation, then you take one or two with you. I would not recommend taking only those who agree with you. Take people who are respected by you and the person with whom you have conflict. Be open to listening more than stating your case. It is possible that both of you can grow, and the community can be strengthened. Finally, these issues can be taken before the church, and the goal is always to restore what is broken, in quiet conversation, where the issues are not made public.

The last thing that this lesson points out is that we have a responsibility to the community. We have the responsibility to point out when one of us in the community has made an error. It is one of the things that I have appreciated in my role as bishop. People who come to me, in love, to point out when I have been wrong. How else will we become better if we do not have people who can honestly come and sit with us and point out the ways in which we have erred. It is the joy of working within the team of officers and staff of the synod – to live in genuine community with them to do the work to which we have been called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We have been in an interesting time with the pandemic. We have been unable to worship in person, to break bread together. We are hungering for the very thing that this lesson lifts up. We are hungering for community, to be together, to be the body of Christ, physically together. This time will pass. I do not know when, but we will gather again in community. And we know that whether that is hundreds of people together or just two or three, Christ is present. That is the good news Jesus has promised, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Jesus reminds us that we are going to have conflict. Jesus gives us the grace and freedom to care for one another. Through Christ's death and resurrection, we too experience new life even in the brokenness and conflict that comes with living in community.

So, the question that I will leave with you today: when we come back to life in community after the pandemic, what kind of community will we want that to be? One in which we speak honestly with one another face-to-face for the sake of the whole community. Or one in which we speak about others because it is too uncomfortable to speak the truth and to be open to hear the truth about ourselves. Will we spend our energy on the color of the carpet, the color of the hymn book, or the position of the light in the parking lot or on becoming the beloved community of Christ?

The one thing I know for sure, Jesus will genuinely and vulnerably be there as he was on the cross. Will we do the same for the sake of one another?

Amen.