

Sermon Title: Pass Peace

Text: Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

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Date: September 4, 2011

Place: Kingston Springs United Methodist Church

Season: 12th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 18, Ordinary 23, Labor Day

Main Point: Christian love seeks reconciliation in every relationship.

I think that we are sometimes prone to believe that the late first century church was all sweetness and faithfulness. Paul writes to the Romans about being under obligation to no one except the obligation to love one another. The law is fulfilled by love. This the law that we memorize verses about.

Then we come to this passage in Matthew that gives those early Christians a process by which to work out their problems with one another. You can bet that Matthew would not have included that passage if everything among those believers was goodness and mercy!

Think about it. They were being persecuted for their faith. They were being killed for holding allegiance to Christ instead of the Roman emperor. Their Jewish brothers and sisters were turning them in. And through all of this, they were still trying to figure out how to live with each other by this new law of peace and love in the midst of anything but that.

They could not 'air their dirty laundry' without being caught and jailed. They could not take their grievances to court - neither Roman court nor Jewish court. And the Christian Church was pretty much a loose network of home churches meeting in secret. They had not even thought of a Pope and church law. This was centuries before the Methodists and other Christian groups had articles of religion to define fundamental beliefs.

The problem-solving process that Jesus lays out has the same elements as we learn in school and in business. If you have a problem with someone, go directly to them about it - don't 'triangulate' by talking around the other person. If it escalates, include witnesses to your problem-solving conversations. And at last resort, air the grievance in the arena of authority - in this case, the whole church.

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The part that caught my attention as I studied this passage was the result Jesus wants if a mutual agreement is not reached. The 17th verse says, "...if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Wow! Do you remember how much the Jews hated a tax collector? And Gentiles were simply ignored. These early Christians were first Jews and then followers of a Jewish

Messiah. Was Jesus telling them to shun or excommunicate those who did not come into line?

I began to check commentaries and cross reference other scripture passages. Then I turned to the 'court of public opinion' - that is the internet. I was amazed to find a source called "The Atheist Bible Study." Listen to this:

An anonymous addresses the website: "So I asked another person (a Christian) and they couldn't answer, so I thought I'd ask you: What does verse 17 mean? What does it mean to treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector?"

The Atheist answers:

"This passage is from Matthew chapter 18, if anyone is interested in looking it up. There are actually a number of ways that this verse can be understood.

First, the verse implies that if a Christian refuses to resolve the matter, it is grounds for excommunication from the Church. That could mean being cut off from friends, family and generally alienated from everything you loved. This is done with the intention of convincing (through coercion, obviously) the person to 'come back to God' and see things 'God's' way.

Another way to interpret the passage is to consider the way that Jews treated the pagans and tax collectors in that time—they refused to associate with them.

Finally, perhaps the 'nicest' way to interpret the verse is that it simply means to evangelize to them. They are obviously lost souls in need of restitution. If we look at point number two again, while Jews in that time did refuse to associate with pagans and tax collectors, those were the very people Jesus was most well known for associating with!

Because it was Jesus that spoke these words, I'm inclined to accept the third interpretation to be what he most likely meant. But keep in mind—some Christians may feel that excommunication is done 'out of love' and they may feel totally justified in doing it.

I hope that helps!"

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The Atheist understands that Jesus choses the path of love, peace and continuing to seek relationship with the offensive person. When I think about the centuries that have passed since Jesus said these words and the many people who have been excommunicated from the church or even killed - it makes me sad. We can't even get along within the Christian family - much less outside of Christianity.

Separation, division, and indifference have characterized the Church of Jesus Christ. Denominations have been formed and congregations splintered. The gulf between Christians and non-Christians continues to widen just like the separation of Church and State continues to widen in the USA. [Aside: read the actual constitution on this point that has been taken to ridiculous extreme in practice.]

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What are we going to do to love and establish peaceful relationships in our little part of the Christian world? Well, for one thing, we have committees - some would say far too many committees for such a small church. But this is a way of talking through some of our tougher decisions and trying to keep them from ever coming to the point that we must treat our brothers and sisters in Christ like Gentiles or Tax Collectors.

For another thing, we sometimes need the reminder that Jesus sought out and spent time with people who did not live by the code of love. How would it be possible to pass peace along without being in relationship with those who do not practice peace?

This may be a difficult week for us. We will see the images of Twin Towers falling and hear the stories of lives lost or altered forever this week. The media will sensationally parade those memories before us as the 10th anniversary of 9-11 approaches. The ten years since then have seen the loss of "The American Dream" established when our soldiers returned from the Second World War.

Who do we consider to be responsible for our loss? Who are the 'Gentiles and tax collectors' in our day? The terrorists, of course. The Muslims? Arabs and Persians? The Middle East? Wall Street? Greedy Capitalists?

With the Labor Day holiday, we are painfully aware of the number of people who have lost employment. Many who work have taken huge pay cuts or jobs that do not inspire them. Are employers at fault? Government?

It is easy to blame faceless categories of people, but how will we treat those people groups when we encounter them face to face? Will we excommunicate them from our love and concern? Will we hope for bad things to befall them?

Even the Atheist knows that Jesus calls us to love our enemy and to do no harm to those who do not agree with us. We are held to a higher calling because we have hope in God and have pledged our allegiance to Jesus Christ.

We are called to pass peace everywhere we go. We pass peace when we approach another looking for the parts we love, not the parts that we find disagreeable.