

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley at St. Luke's Episcopal Church. 9/07/08

Ideals and reality. We are often coping with the tension between what is ideal and what is real. Ideally, we would love to exercise every day, sleep 8 hours a night, and eat healthy food. In reality, we may find ourselves falling short. Ideally, we would like to attend worship and Sunday School each and every Sunday. We would like to get involved in outreach and pledge 10% of our income. In reality, those lofty goals may seem highly unlikely. Ideally, we would spend less time on things that are not life giving and more time on things and people that we really care about. In reality, we get frustrated that we spend more and more time grinding at the grindstone. Ideals and reality. In this morning's scripture lessons, we feel the tension. Ideally, according to Paul's letter to the Romans, we would fulfill the law of God by loving our neighbor as our self. But Matthew's Gospel account presents the reality that neighbors will sin against neighbors. The church is a place, ideally, that brings ideals and reality together. The church, this gathering of faithful brothers and sisters in Christ, is a community, a family, that strives to live out its ideals in the context of our reality. We strive to love even though we know that we often hurt each other. And when we hurt each other, we seek ways to repair the relationship, to regain each other's trust. In a world that is hurting in so many ways, in a world often stuck in a reality of pain and sorrow, we, the church, are to lift up the ideal of love and show that love can be real.

Again, Paul reminds the Romans of Jesus' command that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. But Jesus, in the Gospel, is aware of the human tendency to sin against one another. By sin, I mean that classic definition we find in the catechism: seeking our own will instead of God's thus distorting our relationship with God and each other. Sin results in distorted, broken relationships. Jesus knows about our distorted relationships, that we do not always love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus gives his disciples some instruction about how to handle these broken relationships as they prepare to go and found Christian communities. If a brother or sister, a member of the church, sins against you (if they break the relationship), first speak to the offender alone, in private. Spare them public humiliation. If they listen, you have regained that brother or sister. Note the mention of regaining the person and rebuilding the relationship. The goal is healing the relationship. If the offender does not listen, take two or three witnesses with you. This advice conformed to what was written in the Jewish law. It makes sense, because those witnesses might convince the offender to repent, or they might convince the accuser to let it drop. If the offender will still not listen, if he or she persists in their offenses, then tell it to the church, the community, the gathering of faithful brothers and sisters. If, after all these measures to restore relationship, the offender continues to offend, then the last resort is to exclude them from the community altogether. Treat them like a Gentile, a religious outsider, or like one of the hated tax collectors. Perhaps such exclusion will convince them to return and repent. But again, the move to exclude is a last resort, a punishment taken when all other attempts to connect with the offender have failed.

What do we think about these steps? When discussing this passage, I often find that people focus on the final step of exclusion, the punishment. What does it mean to treat a person like a Gentile and tax collector? Is the excommunication permanent? How are we supposed to relate this to our own situation? Can we really kick people out of the church? I find it interesting that people are most concerned with the punishment. People rarely wonder about the first three options of private conversation, witnesses, and taking it to the church. Punishment is much more fascinating. Our society trains us to be interested in punishment. We hear about it in the news. In school, we take care to learn the rules and the punishments that await us if we break those rules. Our legal system is designed with punishment as a primary tool for rehabilitation. In many ways, our society is stuck in what I'll call "patterns of punishment." Ideally we want to love. In reality, we just can't see a way besides punishment. It begins in family relationships. How often do we seek to punish someone who

has hurt us before we seek to repair the relationship? It starts small. Someone “sins” against me. They make a promise that they don't keep, perhaps. I feel totally justified in making them pay. It might just be a particular “look” I give them. Or maybe I'm less responsive the next time they ask me for something. But punishments can escalate: a cutting remark, an explosive attack. The pattern of punishment often turns inward. We learn punishment from those who love us, and then we often punish ourselves internally when we fail to meet our high ideals and expectations. The pattern of punishment then extends to people in society. People who sin against society, who break the law, are punished. Often their sentence includes an exclusion from society in the form of prison. This sermon is not about prison reform, but I want to highlight the problem of prisons for a moment. As Christians we need to look at prisons. Our country incarcerates more people than any country in the world. In some places we spend more on prisons than we do on schools. The proliferation of prisons and the increasing rate of incarceration in our country are a sign that we, as a society, are stuck in a pattern of exclusionary punishment. We do not like what people do, so we put them away. We are stuck. We struggle to love our neighbor when our neighbor does not want to follow the norms of the community. We struggle to love family members or friends when they do not follow the rules we have for each other. We struggle, and we may not see that breaking a law is breaking a relationship. We often punish people for breaking rules instead of restoring the relationships those rules represent. We can punish each other all we want, but in reality, does more punishment, more exclusion bring us closer to the ideals of reconciliation and love?

Jesus knows our tendency to hurt each other. Ideally, Jesus wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves. In reality, Jesus knows that we have trouble, and his instructions are intended to help us. Remember that Jesus was a faithful Jew. He knew the Torah, the law. He knew that in that law were plenty of complex rules for dealing with sinful offenders, many of which involved kicking people out of the community. Jesus is trying to simplify things: first approach an offender individually, then with witnesses, then in front of the community. Those steps should work. But if necessary, as a last resort, punish them by excluding them from the community. The goal of all these steps is to regain a brother or sister, to regain relationship, not to punish. Sometimes punishment is a necessary step, but it is a step, not an end in itself. The problem with laws is that we sometimes get so focused on upholding the law, that we forget to uphold the people the law serves. Jesus and the Gospel writer, Matthew, were very concerned that the Jewish community was getting so focused on the law that it was losing a sense of how to love. These instructions were to remind the followers of Jesus to gather in the name of Christ, not in the name of the law. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be in the midst of them,” Jesus says. The spirit of Christ, the spirit of divine love will be in our midst when we gather in his name, under his authority. And under Christ's authority, we will learn not to punish each other but to love one another in ways that restore relationships. Under Christ's authority, we will not be blinded by a desire for revenge but will see those who offend us in the light of love. Under Christ's authority, we will find ourselves more and more able to connect the ideal law of love with the real problems of broken relationships.

That is why we have gathered as a church, to learn how to love and to share that love with the world. That is why we are here learning and worshiping together each and every Sunday. We know our tendency to hurt each other. We know our quickness to banish those who have hurt us. We gather as a church to help each other and to be helped by Christ in learning to love. Our worship, our Sunday school, our outreach, our giving and stewardship, our every activity as the church, as gathered brothers and sisters in Christ has this underlying goal: to help us bring an ideal love into a real world.

I want to tell a story that I used to tell to children when I worked in conflict resolution. I begin the story this way: “There is a group of people in southern Africa known as the Babemba. When a

member of a Babemba village commits a serious crime against the community, all the members of the community stop what they are doing and gather in a large council circle. The offender is placed in the middle of the circle.” At this point in the story, I stop and ask the children, “what do you think will happen next?” One child will say, “They will yell at the person and tell them how angry they are.” Another child might add, “They will tell the person not to do that anymore.” Inevitably, someone will say, “They will throw things at the person.” Then I continue the story. “Once the offender is in the middle of the circle, each member of the community takes a turn telling all of the good things the offender has done in his or her lifetime. Each and every good thing, every good quality about the person is told in detail, truthfully and without exaggeration. This can take hours and sometimes days. When every last good thing has been shared, the community holds a celebration and welcomes the offender back into the community.” Now usually the first thing the children ask is, “does that really work?” It does not seem realistic, especially in our context. But my question is: would it work any better if they threw things at the person? Does more punishment always work? It results in pain and suffering, but in a world already filled with suffering, can we imagine a different way? This justice of the Babemba works differently than punishment. It is a justice that seeks the good in someone else, a justice that loves and aims to regain a lost brother or sister. So what do we think? Do we think it is possible to uphold the ideals of love in a real world? Yes, we sometimes have to punish people, but is it possible to seek the good in an offender rather than simply punish the bad? Do we think that reminding someone of their goodness, a family member, a work colleague, an ex-convict trying to rejoin society, might actually restore that person to right relationship?

Before we decide whether a restorative approach will work, I invite us to first to get free of this pattern of punishment, this need to inflict pain on ourselves and others. As we gather together in the name of Christ, we can allow his loving presence in our midst to free us from retribution and teach us a way of loving restoration. Through the church, we can learn about our the ways we hurt each other and learn how to stop. Through Christ and Christ's church, God gives us the authority to bind. And God also gives us the authority to set free. God give us the grace to seek love and freedom before punishment, to restore the relationships distorted and broken by our sin. We are gathered in your name, Lord Jesus. Come into our midst, come into our reality, and help us to love ourselves and each other. Come, Lord Jesus. Help us to love.