

KATHLEEN NORRIS

SERMON FOR 9/10/23

Proper 18 (A) [RCL] Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

I confess that whenever I hear the line from Romans about making “no provision for the flesh” I recall the time I was worshiping with Benedictine monks in a tiny chapel where every sound echoed. When the reader spoke that line, my stomach rumbled loudly. The monk sitting next to me whispered, “Amen.”

More seriously, our Scripture readings today are about how religious communities survive. Exodus describes a ritual that is still practiced every year by Jewish families, celebrating the incredible survival of the Jewish people over the centuries, when so many have tried to destroy them.

Paul’s letters to the early Christians make it clear that the problems congregations faced then are problems we still face today, Churches have always been full of ordinary human beings plagued by ordinary human conflicts. Paul reminds us that to love is to fulfill the law. But isn’t it odd, that he thinks that quarreling and jealousy are just as evil as what we consider the truly nasty, prime-time sins like debauchery and drunkenness? We often regard envy and arguing as minor faults. But Paul insists that they are dangerous; left unchecked, they can destroy a community.

When Paul says that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, he reminds us that this comes with a cost. It requires balancing a healthy love of self with a love of others that will mean self-sacrifice. But that’s a hard sell in our culture, that’s so out-of-balance that it sees self-sacrifice as weakness. Churches are a counter-cultural witness in a society that fosters narcissism. Our ministries aren’t exercises in personal ego-gratification; but acts of selfless love, giving

our time and energy to reach out and serve our parishes and the people Christ has commanded us to serve: prisoners, the hungry, anyone in need.

In today's gospel Jesus talks about how believers are to respond when conflict arises. We may not want to interpret this passage too literally; formal procedures for addressing wrongdoers might not work well today. But the core of the message remains: when a problem arises we are to address it directly. Rather than let our dissatisfaction fester within, we are to seek out people who might help. Especially people with whom we disagree; because even when we're frustrated, open discussion within a parish is a sign that we trust in Jesus' promise that he is with any gathering of two or three members of his church.

Jesus's life is an example of ideal, self-giving Christian love; and today's gospel is about what happens when this ideal runs smack into the reality of bad behavior. But with God's help, and by listening to Jesus, Paul, and each other, we can find ways to prevent our conflicts from getting out of hand. Or not: one small Lutheran church in North Dakota died after a three-generation feud that began when one woman accused another of stealing some of the dishtowels she had taken home to launder after a potluck.

Our parish isn't in that kind of danger, but we are in a time of transition and uncertainty. Some people hate uncertainty so much they leave a church whenever it's searching for a new pastor. I feel blessed by the many who have remained at St Clements. But as the Bishop has reminded us, the changes COVID brought means there's no going back, and as a "new normal" begins to emerge it's causing unease, which easily turns into negativity. As Paul reminds us in another letter, in difficult times we are called to embrace the positive by encouraging one another and build up community.

In recent years this parish has weathered huge changes : we've gone from being the 2nd largest church in the diocese to around number 10, and are longer able to afford both a full-time office manager and a secretary. Rather than imagining that we can get back to where we were, I believe God is asking to move forward, with gratitude for all that God has given us, including all those who are doing the best they can to keep our ministries going and help us worship together. One new blessing is that two members of the parish are training to serve us as lay ministers. Canon Sandy says this is likely to help us attract a new rector.

Our parish is blessed in so many ways. My special-needs sister Rebecca saw us for who we are. She loved coming here, and called us "a hugging church." But community is tricky: to be a member of a church means accepting that we're all equal before God, and there will be times when envy and anger rise in us, even on holy ground. It helps to remember that we're not a group of like-minded people, like a trade union or political party. The Body of Christ is a remarkably diverse bunch of people with all kinds of backgrounds, educational and income levels, political persuasions, and sexual orientations, brought together by God to worship and live the Gospel. And we'll always be arguing about how best to do that.

I began to understand what being a part of the Body of Christ means when I realized that it didn't matter if I didn't like everyone in a congregation, because I had been commanded to love them. This meant trying to keep an open mind, not rushing to judgement or stereotyping people, and observing and especially *listening* rather than talking. When I become frustrated over something in this parish I try to recall what Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the small group he'd managed to gather for worship in a Nazi prison. He said that just the presence of other Christians gave him hope. Just the *presence* of other Christians; which at St. Clements I hope we never take for granted.

Jesus was fully human, which means he had a sense of humor. And maybe there's a little joke in today's gospel: "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." Now I'll read that with a different emphasis — "if two of you agree on earth about ANYTHING?" Really? Jesus may be suggesting that, as much as we like to fuss and fight over matters great and small, to have us EVER agree about anything at all constitutes a miracle.

But look — we've done it. The Jewish faith has endured for over 4,000 years; Christianity for some 2,000 and the Parish of St. Clement for 125. Isn't that amazing? We've been worshiping, singing, taking the Eucharist to shut-ins, caring for each other and our neighbors, socializing, eating together, and cleaning up afterwards all this time, while constantly squabbling over the details. We're still here, because love has prevailed. We've always had God, the Spirit, and Christ with us. And we always will. AMEN.