

COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS

Scripture Readings: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Texts: Romans 13:9-10; Matthew 18:18

One of the ordination exams that people who want to become ministers of the word and sacrament must take is on polity. For some reason, those who lead the church probably should know the ins and outs of the PCUSA constitution. So seminaries offer classes in polity where we get to delve into the wonders of the Book of Order. I have to admit that I did not find the class the most exciting (though I imagine a few nascent stated clerks would disagree); however, every so often one would run across a gem. In class one evening I was thumbing through the Rules of Discipline and I came across the subtitle, “Stay of Execution.” I couldn’t help myself, I leaned over to one of my friends and pointed at the title, “This is a church that takes its rules very seriously.”

Fortunately (or perhaps unfortunately), that subheading has been removed and its intent is contained in the paragraph with the much tamer subtitle, “Effect of Appeal.” Rules of Disciples for a church or denomination are nothing new as we can see from the gospel of Matthew.

We can guess that something was happening in the gospel writer’s congregation and he included this section in the gospel to deal with the issue. The process gives a very clear outline what to do in the event of a conflict with another member of the church. Some modern churches still follow this process in their own rules of discipline. Every so often you might run across a story in the secular press where a church has followed the process much to embarrassment of a particular member who is eventually kicked out. The story reveals that no one wins in such a situation; the member feels aggrieved and unjustly removed while the congregation feels misunderstood and unfairly denigrated in the press. Was this process in the gospel intended to cause this level of brokenness?

Once again, we realize how important context is for the reading of this passage. The process of discipline comes at the end of a passage where Jesus describes the shame of causing little ones to stumble. We might take ‘little ones’ as a descriptor for children but what is really intended is a descriptor for the least ones in a society: those regarded as outcasts, vulnerable, or those used as scapegoats—these categories could also include children. The conversation reported by the gospel writer is intended to call the church to form a community that provides care and compassion for the least of these. By including the least in the community, all people could learn to be in a

community that accepts everyone with love and grace. The process described by the gospel writer is intended to find a way to rectify moments of brokenness, not exacerbate them!

Actually it is Paul's letter to the Romans that provides the real gospel in this situation. Last week we heard Paul instruct the church in Rome on how to show care and compassion to one another, even those who might claim to be our enemies or those we might call evil. In the reading this morning, we hear his conclusion: the commandments are intended to help us do one thing, love our neighbors as ourselves. Paul goes on to remind us that love does no wrong to a neighbor; that is, we do not cause our neighbor to stumble. Paul finally concluded that we love our neighbor as ourselves because we are growing into the Kingdom of God where we put on Christ and put aside our earthly desires.

That word 'desires' really grabbed my attention this time around. The Greek word we translate as desires, I think, is an interesting word. The root of the word originally described violent movement of air, water, the ground, animals or people. That original meaning seems so appropriate in light of Harvey and Irma, even the floods around the world and the earthquake in Mexico. As the word developed it came to mean 'to well up' or 'to boil up' which something we can certainly as a hurricane does it thing with water. In time, the word came to mean to smoke, to go up in smoke, and finally sacrifice (as in religious rite.)

The root became part of the word for desire, impulse, anger, and this larger word finally came to mean wrath. When we add the Greek word "epi-" to this word, we now have desire as in 'to covet.' Epi can mean 'outside' or 'before' and, for me, suddenly the idea of why Paul chose this word makes sense: what do we feel when we do not get what we desire? Disappointment, loss, and anger.

I think we realize what a mouthful Paul has said in today's reading; we commit wrong against a neighbor when we desire (covet) what our neighbor has whether we are talking about the neighbor him/herself, an aspect of their identity, or their possessions. When we do not get what we want, we can fall into anger and damage the relationship or we end up thwarting our neighbor when we take what they desire.

Paul calls us to love instead; with love we lay aside our desire in order to honor our neighbor. The only thing Paul says we should desire is to owe our neighbors love. In giving love, we maintain and build relationships of honor and respect. Such love does not mean we always have to agree with one another, but it does mean that we can respect them by desiring nothing from them or coveting what they possess.

The process that the gospel writer lays out is intended to heal rifts where desire has overcome love, it is not a process intended to ‘correct’ someone but one where all parties involved have an opportunity to restore broken relationship. Even the end of the process is intended to be open-ended.

Think about the irony of the line, “...let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Throughout the gospel of Matthew, who has Jesus spent time with—besides his disciples? He ate meals with tax collectors and he helped Gentiles. So if we treat such a one as a Gentile or tax collector that must mean we treat them as Jesus did.

For the gospel writer of Matthew, the newest members of his congregation were probably people who had been outsiders to the Jewish synagogue—tax collectors and Gentiles. They had been welcomed into the church after they had responded to the good news of Jesus Christ; so when we get to the line, “...let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector,” we are essentially hearing an invitation for a ‘do over.’ We don’t cut the person off, we invite them back with the good news of Jesus Christ. We say to them, “Remember when you first heard the good news?” The invitation is extended with the hope that the original invitation will be renewed and restored. No one is excluded from the Good News and all are welcomed in love. Even our Rules of Disciples begin with the idea that the rules will re-create unity and that with repentance (turning around), restoration is possible.

Between what Paul exhorts us to do and the process described by the gospel writer, we get the idea: love, repent, restore, repeat. [And if you want to know how many times, come next week.]