

*Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

September 10, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew. (Matthew 18: 15-20)

[Jesus said to the disciples:] “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. But 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. If 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. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

About five years ago, we had an extensive discussion here at the church about where Immanuel was heading as we moved into the future. Who would we be? What will we do? At the end of it, we agreed on a mission statement. So, here’s the quiz: Who knows the mission statement of Immanuel? What is our mission? (Silence.) That’s what I thought. I’ll give you a hint. It’s on the back of the bulletin, at the bottom.

We are a community, growing in Christ, living in grace, serving in love. Growing in Christ, living in grace, serving in love. Our calling, our purpose, our dream together, is to grow in Christ, live in grace, serve in love. It’s who we are, individually and together. We are growing in Christ.

So I’ll ask you: How are you growing in Christ? How have you grown in relationship, in learning, in trusting Christ? Of the three phrases, this is the most individually focused. It’s the most inwardly focused. We need a strong center if we’re going to look outward. We need a strong relationship with God and with each other to support any kind of life in Christ. So, where have you experienced or seen growing in Christ around this place? It is not a rhetorical question.

It is 8:00 a.m.; so let me give you an easy example. I am privileged to work with ninth graders in this church, who, for the first time in their lives, have to put their faith into words. And over the course of the year, I have seen them change and grow in their understanding and trust in Christ. Many of you have been mentors; you see it, too.

What else? Okay. During the Music & Fine Arts Camp, you see children who are discovering Christ. Discussions during Adult Forum that are challenging. All right. So you learn about the love of Christ through this community. Yes. Excellent. Excellent.

If you are in daily prayer, you are growing in Christ. So how can you talk to someone every day and not grow in relationship with them? If you are asking hard questions about God and about God's people, you are growing. If you are willing to take a risk, small or large, to live as a follower of Christ, you are growing. If you are making choices based on being a follower of Christ, you are growing. If you are trusting Jesus; if, in the midst of daily stress and responsibility, just pausing for a moment and trying to trust that you are loved and gifted enough in God's eyes, you are growing in Christ.

It is both who we are and who we are becoming. We're working on it. We have a long way to go. But we will be those growing in Christ, growing in relationship with Christ, growing in trust of Christ, being upheld, renewed, and made new by Christ.

And we are people serving in love. This one may be easier for you guys to come up with some examples of. How do you serve in love? How do we serve in love together? Go.

Dorothy Day. The Flea Market. Visiting the people that are ill, praying for them. Care Team.

I have heard about people in this congregation who are tutoring young Somali girls, or mentoring a high school woman all the way through high school and then college. I have heard of people who stand at attention at Fort Snelling cemetery in all sorts of weather to bring honor to service members who have died, or who spend nights at the airport to assist military service members in their travels. I know of people who develop long-term relationships with the most vulnerable in this congregation and in this city. I have heard of people trying to make their own workplaces safer and more welcoming to minorities and LGBTQ individuals. And others who are marching, showing up at the Capitol, training and speaking, to make long-term changes.

All are volunteering in places where their passion and gifts and faith have led them. It is who we are. It is who we are becoming. We're working on it. We have a long way to go. We are those who are serving in love; continuing to deepen and grow in mercy and justice and service grounded in love.

We are and will grow in Christ. We are and we will serve in love. And in between those two – and I think it's brilliant that it is in between those two – we are a people living in grace.

Today, I'd like to focus on grace. What does it mean to live in grace? What does it look like? What is grace?

First, let me clarify what grace is not. One of the most helpful, theologically astute comments I have ever heard was this: "Grace is not simply being nice." It's not saying, "Okay – whatever." It's not just being nice. Grace is the hard, real-world work of love and connection.

Today, in the Gospel reading, Jesus describes life in grace. But the lectionary only gave us a little piece of a larger section, and there is a lot more depth in what is the whole. So let me back up a little and fill in some of this. The conversation Jesus starts something like this:

*"What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountain and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost."*

So, we have this beautiful story about no one being lost. No one being forgotten or written off or excluded. The one who is lost is brought back. But then what? What happens next to that wandering sheep? You know, I have always wondered, in that story of the Prodigal Son, and welcomed back, and a party is thrown, what happens the next morning over the breakfast table? How do they work out how he will live there, what he'll do in the family? Grace doesn't just last a moment. Grace happens over time.

The text from the Gospel today is a "day after" kind of conversation. If you have a problem with someone, welcome them back. But then you've got to do something else. And what you have to do is talk with them. Not talk about them in the parking lot or later. Not vent about them to your two hundred best friends on Facebook. Talk with them. Work it out. Get help, if you have to. You'll probably have to. Grace isn't simply being nice and avoiding the hard work of relationship. It involves listening with resilience to things you'd rather not hear. It involves speaking humbly and without anger. It involves forgiving another and forgiving yourself. Asking for help. Giving yourself and the other time and care. Be patient. Try.

And what if, after all that, you can't work it out? Heaven knows there are situations that are just too broken. There are people who can't or won't see beyond their own pain. What then?

Jesus 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."*

Done. Out. Gentile and tax collector. But the thing is, how does Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? We want to judge and avoid and exclude. Jesus had them over for dinner. He let them know they were loved and welcomed and needed for the wholeness and fullness of the kingdom of God. And then he let them choose from there. But the door remains open.

Grace can't exclude. If Jesus started excluding people because they were sinners, or annoying, or because they disagreed, the kingdom of God would be empty. The streets would echo with nothingness.

It is a risky and difficult mission we have chosen: to live in grace. In a community that disagrees on everything from politics to immigration to what hymns we will sing, in a world that disagrees on so much more, ours is a mission to work it out, to stay in relationship. And, if you can't do that, at least keep the door open and the possibilities real.

Jesus tells of the one sheep that the shepherd risked everything to save. He followed by saying work it out with this one for the long haul. And then what comes next is this:

*Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."*

Keep at it. Live in grace, not for just a moment or an episode, but as a way of life. It's a way of life we are trying to figure it out. It's a way of life we regularly fail at. It's a way of life we are growing in. Living in grace toward others. Living in grace toward ourselves

We are a people growing in Christ, in our own lives and community. We are a people serving in love, reaching out to a hurting world. And, in the center of that, we are a people living in grace; doing the hard work of loving ourselves and others.

Growing in Christ, living in grace, serving in love – now and into the future.

Amen.