

14th Sunday after Pentecost, RCL, Year A

Sept. 10, 2017

Ezekiel 33:7-11
Psalm 119:33-40
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

A sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Pinkerton, Rector, St. John's Episcopal Church
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How to Play in the Sandbox

Today's passage from Matthew brings back memories of the very popular book published several years ago – *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*.¹ It quickly became a best seller because it spoke basic, universal truths we all learned as small children playing in the sandbox:

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Put things back where you find them.

Say you're sorry when you hurt someone.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day.

Take a nap every afternoon

When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together.

These are valuable lessons that we all would do well to remember and follow no matter our age. They are simple but wise rules that help us live in relationship with each other; being mindful of those around us in a way that honors our differences while making way for true friendship. This is the foundation of any community – relationships built on love, forgiveness and acceptance.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus gathers his small inner circle of disciples around him to teach them about the real meaning of community. He is intent to share with them what it means to live in an authentic community of individuals that are interconnected by their shared values of love, forgiveness and compassion. They are bound to each other and to Christ Jesus by their faith in the one, true living God.

¹ Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Learn I Learned in Kindergarten*, (NY: Ballantine Books, 2004).

They don't know it yet, but in a short time, after Jesus is crucified, died and resurrected, this rag, tag group of followers will become the seed of the church, with Peter as the rock upon which it will be built. Jesus knows none of this is even remotely possible if the disciples don't grasp the true value and importance of being in relationship – creating a community where Christ's presence continues to give love and joy and where healing can take place. ²

Jesus gives us a model on how to resolve conflict within the bounds of a community that is founded on God's commandments – to love God with all our heart, mind and soul and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Sounds pretty straight forward but, as we all can attest to, applying them isn't easy. In fact, it may seem nearly impossible at times. Given the polarity and divisiveness of our society today, we know how challenging it is to be in relationship with those unlike ourselves or with someone with whom we disagree deeply over an issue. But, as followers of Christ, it is essential we not lose sight of what is most important – our relationship with God and each other. It

This is why our understanding about the primacy of relationships within the context of our faith community is so important and necessary. Sometimes we can get so overwhelmed with our own concerns and problems that we overlook the very human side of what it means to be in relationship with each other and with God. Because we are not perfect, neither are our relationships. Healthy communities, like healthy families, are often a bit messy because they are actively dealing with issues of conflict in a loving way instead of sweeping them under the rug, where they can fester and build resentment and anger. I tell couples as they prepare for marriage that one of the most challenging things in the world is for one human being to relate to another. This is why we need our faith communities; to hold us up, love and support us when we stumble, become discouraged or lose our way.

Jesus teaches us to go to that person directly you feel has wronged you to see if you can work it out. If that doesn't work, bring a couple more folks to help find a resolution. If that doesn't resolve the issue, seek the help of the church, in other words, the leader. The last resort is to “let such one be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector.” At first blush it sounds like Jesus is saying to banish the one at odds with the community. I don't think so. Remember, the Gentiles and tax collectors are the very ones Jesus chose to spend time with, those on the margins. In other words, we never give up on each other. Our communities hold us accountable for how we treat others, always knowing the pathway to forgiveness and reconciliation is always open. This is what genuine love looks like when lived in community. But, it takes hard work and it takes courage. It is much easier to cast judgment and to cast aspersions.

Over the last several days as we have watched with horror the level of destruction caused by the wrath of Hurricane Harvey in Texas and Hurricane Irma in the Caribbean and Florida. We have also witnessed individuals and communities coming together in remarkable ways to help each other. This is love in action. One human being reaching out and relating to another with no thought or concern given to their differences or beliefs.

² David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/09/pentecost-14-a-christian-community/>, last accessed 9/10/2017.

I read about a woman in south Florida who was desperate to buy a generator for her father who is dependent on oxygen. He has a pacemaker and congestive heart failure and must have oxygen every night. After scouring several stores for a generator she came up empty handed since they had all sold out. Hearing of a new shipment of generators available at a store several miles away she drove to the store and got in line to buy one. She waited patiently in line as the generators were sold. Unfortunately, the last generator was sold to the person ahead of her in line. Desperate with no recourse she buried her head in her arms and cried, knowing how her father's survival depended on having this generator. A man in the store saw her, walked up to her, knowing very little English, asked her what was wrong. After she shared her story about her father and how frightened she was, the man told her, "That's alright, God will provide." Then, the man turned around and put the generator he had bought in her cart. He said, "Ma'am, this generator is for you. You take it. You need it more than I do." Then he reached out, gave her a huge hug and assured her over and over that everything would be alright. She wept in gratitude and relief. Complete strangers, different races, different backgrounds, coming together and reaching out in love. This is being community. This is the Living Body of Christ in action where we are all connected by God's abundant love.

If we learn anything from these natural disasters in our midst it is that we need each other. We need community not only to survive but to make life worth living, where we feel loved and cared for just as we are. At St. John's we are blessed many times over with a community that does just that – we love, forgive and take care of each other, stranger and friend alike, both inside and outside the walls of St. John's. We are not perfect and we have much to learn and share along the way. When I talk with folks about why they come to St. John's one of the answers I hear most is, "it feels like home." Home is where they take us in, no matter what we have done or not done. May this community continue to be a home to all who seek God's love, wherever we gather in Jesus' name, knowing that Christ is among us. Today, reach out to someone you don't know and welcome them home.

Amen.