

Sermon for Sunday, September 10, 2023 Paula Papky for MacNeill Baptist Church

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

Forgiven, Loved and Free

I've been reading a book called, *The Storytelling Animal*, by Jonathan Gottschall. Its subtitle is *how stories make us human*. I like to think of Matthew's gospel as a story that makes us human. Here we are, two thousand years later coming to that same old story and asking, does this gospel still speak to us? Can it still shape us as disciples, as humans with a calling? My answer is yes. It doesn't matter how small we are as a church. There is value in smallness, in living as a minority in a culture of diversity. We can learn how to live a resistance way of life. These texts can shape us into humans who are advocates of hope for humanity.

We don't really know who wrote this gospel. We do know it wasn't the Matthew who followed Jesus as a disciple. He'd have been very old, too old by the 80's or 90's when this book was written. He'd have to have seen the uprisings against the Empire and the destruction of Jerusalem in 68 CE. He'd have to have seen the dispersal of Judeans to Asia, to Africa, and further in 70 CE. He'd have to have been familiar with Mark's gospel and Paul's letters. So, no. He wasn't that Matthew.

What we do know is that this gospel story-teller was living in Antioch, in Syria, as one of the scattered ones of Rome's empire. Once, Antioch was the third largest city in the empire after Rome and Alexandria. It was a crossroads, a trading centre. It was made up of 150,000 to 200,000 people crammed into an

area about the size of Westdale Village. Now that was high-density housing! It had a governor's palace, gymnasia, baths, a famous colonnaded main street, market buildings. Its entrance featured an enormous statue of Romulus and Remus nursed by their she-wolf mother.

All that and tenement housing, too. You can imagine it was a crowded, squalid, dirty city, prone to violence. But there was a nearby garrison of 15,000 to 20,000 Roman soldiers to keep the peace. That famous Roman peace was called by some, "peace with bloodshed."

Some scholars estimate there may have been as few as 19 Jesus followers for whom this gospel story was written. A tiny minority they were. A bit like MacNeill on Labour Day Sunday. One of Matthew's important tasks, then, was to keep that small group together. It was to keep them from quarrelling and leaving the group altogether. Like us, they couldn't afford to lose anyone.

We know that in an honour and shame culture, disputes could escalate quickly into feuds that lasted generations. And so Matthew spells out some rules. He gives the struggling community some rules, some ways of dealing with disputes.

In that ancient time, when a member of a community was wronged, it was always about honour, the most important value in Ancient Middle Eastern life. A certain amount of dishonouring was expected. You shored up your own reputation and your family's honour by shaming the other guy. There was give and take on a daily basis. One day you're slightly dishonoured and the next day you're able to give as good as you got.

Matthew is interested in the point where one in-group member is deeply shamed and cannot, alone, recover his reputation. Perhaps someone's wife is stolen. Or perhaps someone has been bearing false witness. One can't simply shrug and pretend it didn't happen because it's important. Their numbers are small enough to begin with. The good news is that something really good can come out of these serious disputes. It will take some work. To help them, Jesus teaches his followers a three-step process.

Step one: Speak up if you've been shamed or hurt. But do it privately first. There's no guarantee such a conversion will heal the rift, but it might. A lot more listening than speaking on the part of the offender is what helps. Sadly, the one who has given the hurt may not listen or really hear you. That's when you try again.

Step two: You take one or two with you as witnesses when you confront the one who has dishonoured you. This advice comes straight out of Deuteronomy 15:19: "A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrong-doing. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained." There was so much at stake in that early time of Deuteronomy and still in Jesus' time, and still later, in Matthew's. So ingrained in that culture was the practice of revenge if one were wronged, if one were deeply shamed, the families caught in that cycle could suffer bloodshed and the feud could last generations. You can see the need for witnesses to the negotiation process, to head off the revenge cycle.

Step three: If step two doesn't work, move on to step three: tell it to the church, the whole of the in-group. Jesus seems to say, just keep the whole thing

out of the hands of lawyers and other outsiders. Settle it in-house so that everyone's honour and reputation is intact.

Now, Jesus does consider the possibility that the dispute won't be resolved. If there's no repentance by the wrong-doer, nor forgiveness offered by the injured party, the offending member may have to be excluded from the in-group. And it's more than sad when that happens because, as Jesus indicates, this failure to reconcile is no small matter. It has heavenly consequences. He seems to say, "Here's God's view of the situation: I give you the power to bind and the power to loose; that is, the power to include and the power to exclude." Wow" This is an awesome responsibility. It's as if the members of the Jesus group, including us now, are entrusted with giving life and taking it. When that happens, the unrepentant, unforgiven member is dead to the community.

Note that even then, after exclusion, the door is not slammed shut. There is still the power of prayer to surround the whole process. There is still the overarching Divine wish for the community to survive. The one who is now outside the community is still, like the Gentile and the tax collectors, worthy of attempts to convert at a later time. The door is still open. And such a one, the unrepentant offender, is still the concern of the Holy Spirit who intercedes where human words and actions fail.

You knew that – right? It's part of the Good News. In your past, you may have turned your back on church. Yet, the Holy One may have brought you into it by another path. You may have left Christian faith and the church all behind for a time. I know I did. And then I came here. You came here. We gave it another chance. Something within you, some still small voice longed to be once more part

of a community that believes justice and peace and compassion are all-important; longed to find a place where reconciliation is practiced, however clumsily or well. You don't want to be among the irreconciled. You want to know once more what it is to be forgiven, loved and free, in the hymn-writer Brian Wren's words. Or you may long to be no more a stranger to God but to be shaped into a friend. To come to this table, eat the bread and share the cup. To know the joy of life in Christ among these other ordinary people being shaped into disciples, willing to keep gathering together and finding Christ in our midst; learning to love as we are loved by God in Christ. Amen.