

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
August 20, 2023 – The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 133; Matthew 18:15-17, 21-22
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning the touchstone of my homily will be the first verse of Psalm 133: "It is truly wonderful when the people of God live together in peace." Other translations read "in unity." The idea being conveyed is familiar to people in the church. We recall the metaphor used by St. Paul: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12). The members of Christ's body – the church – are united when all are guided by Christ, who is the head of the body, the head of the church.

We may say that this is a vision of how we are meant to live together. Unfortunately, in reality we fall short of realizing this vision. St. Paul certainly recognized this in the churches of his day. Jesus recognized that his followers failed to live in such peace with one another. Pretending that there is harmony when harmony has been disturbed is not constructive. We are well warned by the prophet Jeremiah not to say "Peace, peace, when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 8:11).

How can Jesus, the head of the church, guide us about what to do when peace has been disrupted? We find such guidance in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 18:15-17). Jesus was instructing his disciples about God and God's kingdom, when he said, "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 [that is, not part of the community]."

During my years in parish ministry, I have tried to address conflict within the church using Jesus' teaching as my guide. The results have been mixed. At times, when the problems have been between me and one parishioner, I have requested a face-to-face meeting so that I could discover the cause of the problem. Most often, after hearing the person's concerns, issues were clarified and goodwill was restored, at least for a time. When this has not been successful, I have sometimes asked to meet with the person and one or two other church members of their choosing, on occasion with the entire vestry, with the goal of greater understanding and reconciliation, if possible. Again, this has sometimes been successful, at least for a time. There have also been occasions when mutual understanding has been impossible to reach, despite all efforts, and people have left the parish to join another church community. It is always painful when efforts toward peace made in good faith fail, but perhaps in this world it is unrealistic to expect that they will always succeed or to expect that good faith and goodwill are always operative in the church.

Regardless of the result, we are meant to persevere in good faith. After Jesus instructed his disciples in the words I quoted earlier, Peter asked, "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" (Matthew 18:21-22). That is certainly perseverance! And it leads us to consider the issue of forgiveness.

I have recently read portions of a newly published book called "Forgiveness: An Alternative Account" by Matthew Ichihashi Potts, who is a professor of Christian Morals at Harvard Divinity School and an Episcopal priest serving the Memorial Church at Harvard University. I would like to share some of the book's main ideas with you. You may not be interested in reading a scholarly book of philosophy and theology, but the topic of forgiveness is of interest to all of us because it is at the heart of our faith and our prayer. You may find, as I do, that forgiveness is an aspect of Christian life that is especially challenging. This book has guided me to a better understanding of what Christian forgiveness is and is not.

After reviewing the thought of major writers of the past and of our day, such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Potts concludes that forgiveness is the moral habit of Christian nonretaliation. Forgiveness is about rejecting vengeance and retribution. It is interesting that the word "retaliation" has its roots in *lex talionis*, the law and idea of justice as "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." We find that law in the Old Testament books of Exodus and Leviticus. It does promote justice in that it limits retaliation; punishment is not to exceed the original offense. But as Christians we are called to refrain from retaliation. This is part of what it means to love our enemies.

Forgoing retribution is a good working definition of what forgiveness is. It is also important to identify what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not about feelings. Forgiveness is about what a person does – or restrains from doing – but positive feelings have nothing to do with it. The actual process of struggling to restrain from revenge will very likely mean struggling with feelings of bitterness, anger, sadness, and even despair. These feelings are human responses to being wronged by another person. A strong argument has been made that feeling resentment as a response to wrongdoing actually promotes justice because it helps us recognize and resist injustice. Forgiveness is about how we behave toward others. We are not called on to make our enemies friends or even to become friendly toward them.

Forgiveness is not reconciliation. As Potts writes, "Forgiveness may in some cases prove a first step to reconciliation, or it may simply occasion a lasting nonretaliatory estrangement" (page 8). Reconciliation may not even be desirable in cases where the safety and wellbeing of the injured person are at issue. As an example, think of domestic situations in which one partner is abused by the other. Attempts at "reconciliation" most often lead to repeated abuse, often more severe abuse. This is emphatically not what forgiveness means.

These thoughts about forgiveness have ancient roots in the Christian tradition. It is recorded that one of the 4th century desert fathers, Abba Poemen, was asked what it meant to lay down one's life for one's neighbor. He answered, "when a person bears an injury with patience, and does not look for revenge, that is when a person lays down his [or her] life for the neighbor" (from Roberta C. Bondi, "To Love as God Loves, page 47).

We pray in Eucharistic Prayer C, "Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ." In the sacrament we believe that God offers us grace. God does not force grace upon us. We are encouraged to cooperate with the grace God offers, to freely choose to live as "one body, one spirit in Christ." The words of the prayer are not magic. The prayer will not accomplish the vision without our active cooperation. True unity and peace in community are not served by blindness to the forces that work against both. Like silence, peace is valuable, hard-won, and easily broken. God invites us to live together in peace. May we say "yes" to God's invitation, open our hearts to God's grace, and act for the peace and welfare of all, for "It is truly wonderful when the people of God live together in peace." Amen.