

Sermon for Sunday, September 7, 2008
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18)
By JoAnn Taylor

First Lesson	Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm	Psalm 149
Second Lesson	Romans 13:8-14
Gospel	Matthew 18:15-20

Glory, honor and praise be to thee, O God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit – now and for ever.
Amen.

Sleeps, but rests not.
Loved, but was loved not.
Tried to please, but pleased not.
Died as she lived – alone.

These words are found on a tombstone in an ancient cemetery in San Antonio – the epitaph of a woman whose life was empty of love, compassion and mercy. They are words of futility – the words of a life wasted like so much garbage. No date of birth or date of death is to be seen – just the names of her two husbands, her own, and the epitaph to mark her resting place. These words speak volumes about this woman's life even when we know nothing else about her.

[pause]

Love – it is so important to who and what we are. We are creatures of love created for love.....and yet, we are capable of the most unbelievable acts of cruelty and hate towards each other. Paul's letter to the Romans makes direct reference to the Ten Commandments – specifically to the last 5. They are the guidelines for how we should live with each other. Paul sums them up nicely with his statement – “Love can do no harm to a neighbor”. Later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus sums up all Ten Commandments in the words of the Great Commandment – ‘You shall love the Lord thy God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ {pause} Paul says we owe no one anything except love – but for us to love another as much as we love ourselves – well, that may take some doing. After all, we - having been created by a loving God in love and for love – are basically selfish and self-centered creatures. Looking out for number one is what we do best – therefore, we always find ourselves in debt to each other – owing a debt of love.....because it is impossible for us to love as God does – faithfully and without reservation. When Jesus summed up the commandments, he didn't put qualifiers on his statement – he simply issued a commandment for us to follow in our daily lives. It covers everything – how we should live our lives with God – and how we should live with each other. Paul's words to the new Christians in Rome serve as a wake-up call – they are reminders that we must do our best to live with each other in love – and that we must not let

anything come between us and God. God, through Christ, must be the prime driving force in our life. We can allow nothing to come before God in our lives. The second commandment reminds us that our God is a jealous God who desires all of our love and attention – one who will not tolerate other ‘gods’ or ‘idols’ in our lives.

[pause]

This brings us now to our gospel for this morning. Today’s reading is one of the most difficult passages to understand, because it appears so out of character for Jesus. If you take this passage literally as it’s written, and compared it to some of Jesus’ other teachings, you would find many contradictions in these verses. The first thing you should notice is that Jesus is supposedly talking about ‘the Church’ – a concept which did not yet exist. It will be several centuries after Jesus’ death before the church as we know it begins to take shape. The creeds we recite will not be written and accepted until about the middle to late 4th century. At the very least – the line from our gospel – ‘If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen to the church, let such a one be as a Gentile or tax collector.’ - is not part of what Jesus originally said. This line was most likely added much later, when the newly formed Church was more in need of rules and discipline than love and forgiveness. Also, lest we forget, the author of this particular gospel was a tax collector – so it would seem highly unlikely that Jesus would write off tax collectors as ‘unsalvageable’. Same with the Gentiles – Paul was a former Pharisee and near rabid anti-Christian before his conversion – and the primary focus of his ministry wasthe Gentiles. Jesus was often accused of being a friend of sinners and undesirables – and Matthew states in Chapter 21 that the sinners, harlots, Gentiles and tax collectors will enter the Kingdom of Heaven before the orthodox religious leaders.

[pause]

No, it seems fairly obvious that at least in part, this gospel reading is not of Jesus – but was altered by the Church at a later time to suit its own needs. A truer interpretation of this reading would go something like this: If anyone sins against you, spare no effort to make that person admit his or her fault and to set things right between you. If however, that person wont listen to you, then seek the help of others in setting things right. Deuteronomy 19:15 states that a single witness shall not prevail against one accused of a crime or sin; only the evidence of two or more witnesses will allow the charge to be sustained. No where in the gospels does Jesus ever set limits on human forgiveness. Jesus came to earth to secure the promise of forgiveness for all our sins – the promise that no sin is ever so great that it cannot be laid at the feet of God as we ask for his forgiveness; that while there is breath in our bodies it is never too late to ask for God’s mercy.

[pause]

What about the phrases 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' and 'if two of you agree upon earth upon any matter for which you are praying, you will receive it from my Father'? These two phrases or statements – if taken literally – can cause a great deal of heart ache? Times innumerable, two or more have agreed on or prayed for the same idea or person and their prayers were not answered – or at least they were not answered in any manner that they were aware of. God doesn't always answer our prayers – or answer them the way we want him to. God will do what is best for us even though it may not seem that way at the time. When we pray for a loved one's return to health and they pass away – our prayer was answered – it really was – it just wasn't answered the way we wanted it to be. In heaven, our loved one will be in perfect health without pain or deformity (the answer to our prayer) – they just aren't here on earth with us where we want them to be. The key point here is that effective prayer must be intercessory – a prayer for others – and must not be focused on OUR needs or OUR desires. When prayer is unselfish, it is always answered – our hope and trust in God's mercy and love is the basis for our belief.

[pause]

When two or three are gathered in my name there I will be also. This statement is a promise that not only speaks to the church and corporate worship, but also to the family – the two or three originally meant mother, father, and child – and thereby formed a promise by Jesus to be with every family – every group – every home – every school – nowhere is beyond the limits of his love. This is not to say that individual prayer is not good – it is very good, as long as it isn't just about us. A well written or spoken prayer should begin with praise, thanksgiving to God – followed by intercession, and then commending our prayers into God's hands through Jesus. We end our petitions with amen. Amen is our acceptance of God's will in all that we place before him. When we say it, we are saying 'Let it be according to your will, O Lord' – as we lay it all before him.

[pause]

This gospel reading is very much at the forefront of debate in the church. As we struggle with issues that threaten to divide us – let's not forget that what Jesus is calling us to do here is live in harmony, peace and love. He's challenging us to step forward and meet our brothers and sisters in Christ half-way. He's not advocating that we judge them.....or ex-communicate them.....or destroy them – he's calling for us to love them. He wants us to understand them even though we may not agree with them. Let nothing stand in your way – let nothing come between you – be willing to recognize God in every person – no matter who or what they are. No sin is too great for God to forgive; and only God has the right to judge one on one..

[pause]

And what about the woman whose epitaph we heard at the beginning of this homily – she was the embodiment of this reading. The words suggest a life of cruel abuse against her – but it also suggests that she tried to live this passage – She loved, but was loved not. She gave of her love – to her husbands – perhaps to family, friends, neighbors or strangers – and received no tangible love in return. She tried to please, but pleased not. She tried to please them – but they rebuffed her attempts to do so. Died as she lived – alone??? {pause} I doubt very much if she was alone when she died – even if it appeared so. No loving God would step away from one who tried so hard to live her life in love –she died trying. She didn't let anything stop her – she didn't let anything come between her and God. Even if she didn't win the battle on earth – she won the battle that counted. She lived her life in love – and she did not die alone. God was there with her every step of the way.....Amen.