“In it for the Long Haul”

Matthew 18:15-20 Romans 13:8-14

When I finished social work school, I planned a road trip all over the country: Atlantic to Pacific and back again. After awhile, I realized that I didn’t want to go alone in case all those lonely hours getting highway hypnosis meant me falling asleep at the wheel. There was this woman in my social work program who, honestly, I didn’t know too well. We were class friends, so we were friendly, did group projects together, but we never really socialized outside of school.

I don’t know why I was so sure that she was the one to be my road trip companion. I plied her with cheesecake and chai lattes; I offered to pay for all the gas; I told her it would be a once in a lifetime trip. Lucky for me, she agreed. Also lucky for me – we ended up becoming the best of friends. Because really…the odds of this being a good idea were so slim. Who goes on a weeks-long road trip with someone they barely know?

Once we began, we had lots of time to get to know each other. But, eventually, we started having little conflicts, disagreements. Since we were almost constantly together, sometimes we just wanted to be alone, but we were trapped in a vehicle together with, as they say, “miles to go before we sleep.” And I learned something about relationships – any relationships where we’re in it for the long haul, whether family or friend, romantic or church. You have to approach every conflict knowing that, when all is said and done, that person will still be there and you will be, too. You have to weigh how you respond – what you say and what you do – and consider whether you’ll regret it when the dust settles. You have to trust that what unites you is more powerful and more real than what ripples the waters. This is love; this is loyalty; this is hope.

In terms of our personal relationships, we limit this kind of fidelity to a small number of people and we are right to do so. But I think this attitude toward conflict is exactly what we are called to in the church and that can be so daunting, even terrifying. In Romans, our passage starts out, “owe no one anything, except to love one another.” When we commit to Christ, when we join the church, we become a member of a family – great and holy.

However faithful we are, though, we’re still human. We still sin; we let each other down and we let ourselves down. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus has just finished telling the parable of the Lost Sheep: about the shepherd who will go after even one little lamb who strays off the path. Right away, he shifts topics to talk about the church. Since Jesus called those disciples, calls us to be the church, he is giving us remarkably specific instructions on what it means to be the church. He does not want us to be unrealistically idealistic, pretending that having Jesus means we won’t do wrong. No, he spells out how to deal with the conflict that will inevitably come as we struggle with how to be faithful and with our own bad impulses.

Behind all of this instruction is this notion that members of the church, who Christ calls our brothers and our sisters – these people are our new family. To be in the church means to learn how to be a good and righteous member of this family, loving our God and loving our neighbor – following the law of love. I suppose the best-case scenario would be that when a member of the church sins against you, they would realize it and come to you. They would repent and make it right. But it doesn’t always work out that way. So, without being asked, Jesus gives us a roadmap for how to proceed.

First, we need to pick our battles. If we’re going to be in it for the long haul, we can’t decide that we have the right to pick and fuss about everything we don’t like. Some things are more a matter of personal preference than spiritual necessity. We will not make it together if all we can see is flaws. We will not make it without giving ourselves, and each other, some grace.

If we do pick this battle, then we must remember that the Jesus is pointing us to reconciliation and restoration where possible. It’s not about setting ourselves up as judges over one another. It’s not designed to shame people or keep them on their toes lest they fail to meet an impossible standard. Jesus is leading us to see the best in our sister or brother. Start out by assuming that they were unaware of what they were doing or that they didn’t realize that they hurt you. Start out by assuming that they know that, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Give them a chance to hear what they have done, to explain what happened, to apologize and make things right. This is why the process starts privately, one on one. So far as we are able, we offer grace even to those who hurt us. If they hear and repent, if the relationship can be restored and the community can find deeper harmony, everyone has won. And, as the Parable of the Lost Sheep reminds us, there is rejoicing in heaven.

But we can be stubborn or proud. Sometimes we don’t hear or we won’t hear that we’ve hurt someone else. Maybe we’d rather feel good about ourselves than consider that we have caused harm. So, Jesus tells us to bring two or three witnesses who can give evidence of the sin. Here, we see that the sin of this one member has done more than just affect that one person. Others have seen or heard it; others are concerned; others want to help heal the wound and make things better. Still in a private setting, they try to reveal what has happened, to make clear how what they witnessed did not show Christ’s love.

If they repent – so much the better. Forgiveness is granted and the matter is set aside. Yet, if the offender will not listen what then? Then, the matter is brought before the church as a whole. This is, well, not how we tend to do things, right? It’s hard to picture this without thinking of someone stuck in medieval stocks in the town square getting pelted with rotten vegetables. But this isn’t a mean-spirited gesture – it’s not designed to shame. It’s a chance for the offender to hear from the community in a calm fashion that – yes, your actions hurt this one and they don’t reflect the love of Christ. It is a way to say that we want you to keep being a part of this community, but if you keep harming our family, you are not behaving like part of our family. If the offender cannot hear that – if they don’t care about that, then they stopped being a part of the community long before that moment.

So, Jesus tells us – we have some power about what our church communities look like. We have some control over who we welcome in and who we cast out; what behavior we permit and what behavior we condemn. How will we use that power? What standard will we hold each other to? What standard will we hold ourselves to? I think that’s what the verse about binding and loosing things is about – will we accept the responsibility for who we welcome into our family of faith and the course of each one’s spiritual journey? Bullying each other will not get anyone to heaven, but neither will being passive and never speaking up. Learning to be a family together – to grow in faith together – that is the beginning of our work in building the kingdom of heaven on earth. Indeed, where even two or three gather in Jesus’ name, he is here with us.

Salvation is near – nearer every day – but in these days, unity might be our most difficult calling. So often, we would rather be right than be together. We would rather hate than love. Yet, unity is not about everyone sharing my opinion. It isn’t about finding common enemies.

Unity in Christ is about choosing the narrow way, the harder way, that looks at everyone as a child of God – worthy of love and grace. Unity calls for us to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another; to apologize to one another and grant forgiveness; to hear each other’s griefs and share each other’s joys. Our challenge is this: the church is bigger than our church alone. It includes members in every time and every place, on earth and in heaven. We owe each other love and from love will come the unity we need. Some may indeed refuse to be reconciled, but so far as it depends on you, be the one who shows up in love and trust God for the rest.

This past week, my heart has been so heavy watching events unfold in Louisville as the indictments came down in the Breonna Taylor case. I went to seminary there and so the unrest and the violence is taking shape on familiar streets and with some familiar faces. Now, I know we all have our opinions about this case: about who did what, who to blame, what to believe. It is not my role to tell you the facts of the matter. But I do feel called to speak because we are united in faith with – called to unity with those we agree with and with those we disagree with. I can tell you that the pain and the grief from that city is overwhelming from people across the political spectrum. People are shocked and scared – angry and wary about the future. People are afraid that they are not safe in their own homes – Black friends especially. Police are afraid that the people hate them; they worry that people are looking for excuses to attack them. Many wonder what justice means in this moment.

These are our brothers and sisters in Christ – not outsiders, but part of our family and they are hurting. Whatever we believe personally, we must respond boldly with empathy, love, and prayer. We must consider that unity in Christ right now means we should not rush to argue every point or to judge. Rather, we should honor this grief and pray for God’s presence. We owe each other love. Love in Christ is what will carry us forward now. So, we pray: may we heal together and grow together as a family. May we meet every moment as peacemakers and servants of grace. May we remember that we belong to each other as we journey together: one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Amen.