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St. John's Episcopal Church
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Pentecost XIV (Proper 18A, Matthew 18:15-20) with the Baptism of Hunter Schurr

By Emily Dickinson:

Forgiveness

My heart was heavy, for its trust had been
Abused, its kindness answered with foul wrong;
So, turning gloomily from my fellow-men,
One summer Sabbath day I strolled among
The green mounds of the village burial-place;
Where, pondering how all human love and hate
Find one sad level; and how, soon or late,
Wronged and wrongdoer, each with meekened face,
And cold hands folded over a still heart,
Pass the green threshold of our common grave,
Whither all footsteps tend, whence none depart,
Awed for myself, and pitying my race,
Our common sorrow, like a mighty wave,
Swept all my pride away, and trembling I forgave!

OK, let's recap, just in case you were distracted: Jesus suggests that we take someone aside, someone who's caused us pain or confusion, that we take him or her aside, and engage in a private conversation. If we're still not happy with the outcome, and if it's too serious to just let slide, we should take it to the person in the company of a couple of others – perhaps they can serve as mediators, or facilitators, or perhaps they can shed some light on the conflict that we might not have seen before. And if that doesn't work, Jesus said, take it to the church.

We must remember that the church at the time of Matthew was just a baby. It wasn't the Roman Catholic Church, it wasn't the Anglican Communion, it wasn't First Presbyterian or St. John's, it was small gatherings of like-minded Jews and Gentiles who were followers of Jesus Christ.

And so taking the issue to the church was more like taking it to a small house gathering, a safe community where people could talk about their differences in a supportive environment.

And then, Jesus said, if the person doesn't recant (or repent, if it's really, really serious), treat him or her like a Gentile or tax collector.

In other words, have dinner with them.

Because remember: that's what Jesus did.

He's not telling us to cast them out of the community, he is telling us to embrace that person *in spite* of differences. He is telling us to be loving, accepting, and forgiving – and welcoming.

That's hard to swallow, isn't it.

At each step that Jesus proposes, he is urging us not to fall out of relationship. He's urging us to keep the conversation going. He is really admonishing us not to turn our backs on the person.

Because if that person is loved by God, how can we do less? And we must not wait... because at some point, it may be too late.

I think of churches in conflict. Serious conflict. Parishes in our own Diocese. The United Methodist Church. Parishes walking away over different ways to read the Bible. Whole international churches living in a cloud of secrecy about tragic, *tragic* events.

I don't see such conflicts at St. John's.

Of course we have differences. Come to a meeting of the Vestry or the Music staff. We're not just yea-sayers, but there is a sense of safety: If I say something that's contrary to what you feel, you will find a safety zone where you can tell me. And you won't save it for the after-meeting in the parking lot. At least I hope you won't.

We're behaving like reasonable, faithful adults should behave.

But the secrecy, lies, gossip, rumor that exist in churches – how is it that they seem to thrive in communities which say they follow Christ?

I think it's about power. Unfortunately, it is sometimes about white male power, but ultimately, it's simply about power and the fear of losing power. The fear that things won't be the way "they used to be."

"My Aunt Mary's church" simply doesn't exist anymore; for those of you new to the Episcopal tradition, you're welcome. Actually, we need to acknowledge that the church "like it used to be" wasn't very pretty: it excluded women from positions of responsibility, it gave lip-service to the ministries of people of color (how lovely those people are taking care of their own), and it was shrouded in secrecy. We are good to be rid of it.

And Christianity itself is changing, people: shifting with new energies, new attitudes, new proclamations and new hope. Perhaps it is re-becoming more like what it was meant to be in the first place: Gatherings of faithful people and seekers who longed to heal a broken world in the name of Jesus Christ, their Lord. We are becoming more transparent, less patriarchal, less dogmatic, more willing to question and to think and to be reasonable people of faith.

I think we've come to realize that we cannot heal a broken world if we are not willing to be healed of our own brokenness. And we cannot heal a broken world if we are not willing to heal broken relationships.

I am not saying that when conflicts arise we must simply "forgive and forget;" that might be a simplistic solution to problems that are too great.

But what I am saying is that we must always, always be open to reconciliation and forgiveness – to forgive and to be forgiven.

Forgiveness... reconciliation... they're not the same as sweeping something under the rug, they're not the same as everybody just getting along and making nice. They are not cheap

grace. They come from deep within the heart. They recognize the dark spots of our own souls, they recognize our *own* need for repentance, so that we can be transformed into a people who love, a people of compassion.

Forgiveness requires a willingness to accept our own very real, very human frailties, and a willingness to enter into a relationship in a new, deliberate way. It requires a refusal to erect a barrier, a wall between me and the other. It requires that I be open to the possibility, *just the possibility*, that a) you, or he, or she, might be right, and b) I might be wrong.

I am not pure of heart, and I admit it's hard work to see my own part in conflict so I can repent, but I know that my own repentance will lead to a deepening of my relationship with the other and a deeper relationship with God.

It's tough work, but it's all about relationship. My relationship with you, our relationship with God. It's all about compassion, it's all about love.

And may I humbly suggest: It's what Jesus wants.

Amen.