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Exodus 12:1-14

Matthew 18:15-20

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A TRUE HOME TO WHICH TO COME

Over thirty-five years ago, a South African movie entitled “The Gods Must Be Crazy,” was released. It was a comedy with a significant message. The film centers on a remote African tribe in Botswana that has no knowledge of a world beyond their immediate area. The tribe is one that works well together even without the benefits of modern technology. The blessings they experience are understood to be coming as a result of favor from the gods above.

But then, one day an empty glass Coca Cola bottle is dropped from a passing airplane and it falls unbroken to the ground. The bottle is then found by the people of the tribe, who think this strange thing is another gift from the gods. Soon the bottle becomes a tool used in cooking, working, and even play. But since there was only one bottle to go around, there begins to be competition for the use of this gift in their midst. Envy, anger, enmity, and even violence erupt among the tribespeople to the extent that their sense of community becomes threatened. What were they to do with that which caused such discord? ¹

As we hear in the gospel accounts, Jesus not only shows his love for each individual, but also enables his followers to experience the blessings of being a part of a caring community. Here in Matthew’s account, Jesus indicates the fragility of that gift. There are plenty of figurative bottles that drop from the sky that can challenge the unity of a group of people. Tensions can arise over disagreements, jealousy, slights, or a lack of a common vision, all of which can lead to alienation and a deep sense of brokenness. In our passage from Exodus, at a point when the faith community was being devastated by external oppression, God’s deliverance and restoration came.

The church hopes it can be a community of light and hope, peace, and joy for the world. And yet, when there are inner squabbles and disparate priorities, we fall short of the unity that is required for us to fulfill our dreams for how God might use us in our time. In the movie I referred to, a character named Xi takes the Coke bottle to what he believes is the end of the world and throws it into oblivion. Jesus, in our passage from Matthew, knowing there are bottle issues that can't just be disposed of in that way, encourages us not to just sweep them aside. Rather he calls us to move away from enmity that can separate so we can move toward being the community that sustains us and others.

I think most of us have been moved by the video showing the vast flooding and destruction that Hurricane Harvey and the tremendous amounts of rainfall that fell on southeast Texas a couple of weeks ago. And now today, there is great concern for the people of Florida with Hurricane Irma. Many have lost or will lose their houses, at least for a period of time. I have to say that I have been heartened to see the outpouring of actions where many people were reaching out to meet the urgent needs of others whether they knew them or not. That kind of response that provides a sense of home even to those without houses sometimes arises when there is a major emergency. What could sustain that kind of community mindset when there does not seem to be the same level of need of urgent life-saving action?

Whether we think of it as some kind of divisive bottle that drops into our midst or as an internal storm that sweeps through a community of faith, Jesus calls us to action to protect or repair the relationships that form the basis for that community. When there has been a break in relationship with a sister or brother in Christ, he directs us to go and speak directly with that person, seeking to defuse the storm by demonstrating care for the relationship. This is not to be a trip of righteous indignation and hurricane force winds, but a humble reaching out to a person with whom you have been estranged to seek healing of the relationship. Grace, humility, and prayer are good accompaniments for such an approach.

Is there a person or a situation that comes to mind for you here? In worship, we express the peace of Christ to one another through a handshake, but going to someone seeking to repair a breach can be an expression of the peace of Christ that goes far beyond the expressions in our worship services. The whole point is not who is right, but rather what is needed for there to be right relationships in the community. The goal is not revenge for someone who has been offended, or justification on some principle. Rather it is honoring the immense gift of community that God desires for us to experience.

I'm not guaranteeing that going to someone with whom you have been estranged will definitely work; Jesus doesn't guarantee that it will always work. In fact, he instructs that whenever such a first step doesn't lead to healing for the relationship, that the next step is to reach out to a small group of others within the faith community to confer with them and to take steps that might lead to healing. At times, when reconciliation doesn't occur, the behaviors that are undermining the sense of community might need to be discussed by the community as a whole. For instance, that has led to the initiatives in church bodies to protect those who are vulnerable from someone who seeks to carry out sexual or physical exploitation, which not only harms individuals, but the community as a whole. Then, if there are times when none of the actions bring restoration of relationship in the community, then Jesus says, "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." We might hear that as permission to write that person off, but then we remember how Jesus had table fellowship with the hated tax collectors and showed compassion and mercy to Gentiles. Yes, relationships may be strained or even break. Life in community may be less than whole. But never is anyone to be relegated to a status of being beyond the realm of God's love and grace. In some extreme cases, we may have to leave reconciliation up to God, thankful that our God is all about reconciliation, love, and hope.

At the end of our passage, we hear Jesus say, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." We are glad to be able to affirm God's presence when just a small group of us gather. But in the context of this

passage, we can take Jesus' message as affirmation that when we are working hard on reconciliation and community, that he is certainly in our midst. Jesus commands us, to turn and to keep turning to one another, not in judgment, but in grace-filled love, striving to overcome alienation with reconciliation. When we make that effort, we see God most clearly. Life as God's people is about connections and community, not enmity and alienation.

This congregation is made up of people who are richly diverse. Some of us were not born in the United States. Some of us were not raised as Presbyterians. Some of us have differing political views. Some of us are not even Eagles' fans – imagine that! And yet, what a glorious thing that God's pervasive, persistent, penetrating, proliferating love has brought us together as a community of faith. That is a great gift to us and one which we can offer to others without having less of it for ourselves. I love the buildings that we have here – we have a beautiful church. But I love even more that were our buildings to be destroyed by fire, as they were in the past, that we together would not lose our sense of being a church home. That home lies in the Spirit of God who is with us and knits us together to respond to the call of Christ in our time. Part of that call is to seek to be a loving, caring community of faith - something we each need, something that our broader community definitely needs. And something, that when we experience it, doesn't leave us thinking that God must be crazy, but rather that God is crazy in love with us. There is a true home to which to come. Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹ The movie, "The Gods Must Be Crazy," was written by Jamie Uys and Mont'e Ramodumo, directed by Jamie Uys, 1980.