

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 6, 2020, Year A

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 18:15-20/Romans 12:9-21

“Relationships Through Love”

I think we all have to, at some point admit that we are nowhere near perfect – especially in our relationships with one another. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul had some significant things to teach us about our relationships – and their importance. Jesus teaches us that we need to take reconciliation seriously. In today's culture we are surrounded by broken marriages, shattered families, feuds between neighbors, and divided churches. We can refuse to face the facts, swallow our anger or resentment, cover over the cracks, and carry on as if everything is normal while seething with rage inside. Or we can simply avoid and ignore the other person or group, and pretend they do not exist. Usually the outcome to that is disastrous. Many Christians have taken the cover-over-the-cracks option, believing that this is what 'forgiveness' means – pretending that everything is all right, that the other person hasn't really done anything wrong. My goodness, sometimes you have to take a stand. That simply will not do. If someone else – another Christian in particular – has been offensive, aggressive, bullying, dishonest, or immoral, nothing whatever is gained by trying to create 'reconciliation' without confronting the real evil that has been done. Forgiveness does not mean saying 'it didn't really happen' or 'it didn't really matter'. In either of those cases, you do not need forgiveness, you just need to clear up a misunderstanding. Forgiveness - is when it did happen, and it did matter, and you are going to deal with it and end up loving and accepting one another again anyway. That is why what Jesus tells us here is vital. First go and see the person, one on one. That needs courage; it also needs prayer and humility. The other person may well respond with a counteraccusation, and there may be truth in it which you need to recognize – though it certainly is not always the case that both sides are usually equally to blame.

If that works – Jesus says that 'You've won over a brother or sister.' Reconciliation often creates a closer bond than you had in the first place. But if it does not work, and if after thought and prayer you are still convinced that there is a wrong to be settled, take one or two others with you. You should choose people who are prepared to tell you some uncomfortable truths if that is what is needed. And, if you are in the right but the person refuses to see it, they are your witnesses that you are not just making it up. Bringing two or three witnesses is based on Deuteronomy 17 and 19 – on evidence. Jesus' third and final back step is to tell it to the church. That would then be the group that should be told about any confrontation that had remained unresolved. Now comes the hardest part. If someone still refuses to yield and be reconciled, they must be treated as an outcast. And you might ask- what are the alternatives? If there is real evil involved, refusal to face it means a necessary break of fellowship. Reconciliation can only come after the problem has been faced straight on. We also need to remember that God's presence is with us; our actions on earth have an extra, hidden dimension, the heavenly counterpart of what we do here. And, when we pray together in Christian fellowship, we are therefore assured of being heard and answered. Most importantly, we always need to remember that this needs to be done with love. If we take that seriously, engaging in reconciliation will still be costly. But it will always be done in real hope, with joy waiting round the corner for those who persevere.

The Apostle Paul in Romans 12 tells us that at the forefront of all relationships must be love - but it needs to be genuine. There can be absolutely no 'lukewarm!' In Revelation chapter 3 Jesus warns about being 'lukewarm' and says as an example to the church at Laodicea "*So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth.*" (Revelation 3:16) That is the nice way of saying it. I do not know about you but I do not want any part of any 'wishy washy - Lukewarm situation!' If it has got to do with God then I want to be hot. If it has got to do with good - then I want to be hot. This goes hand in hand with the message of today's Holy Gospel from Matthew - and the Epistle to the Romans in which Paul encourages us to "*Live in harmony with one another.*" (Romans 12:16) If you have got a problem with a friend or a family member - time does not help if you let it simmer. Go to them in love - and if that does not work - Jesus gives us the proper prescription - that is not just for the first century but it is for all time.

Every time Jesus met with His apostles, especially after He rose from the dead, He offered them His "peace" - or "shalom" - showing an example of putting one's pride aside and on more than one occasion He told them, and He told us to not only love God - but to "*love your neighbor as yourself.*" (Luke 10:27) In last week's sermon I asked:

- How can I love my neighbor when sometimes I do not even like him? If I really do not like someone, how can I love them?
- If I am commanded to love them, and try to act as if I do, doesn't that make me a hypocrite? Even worse is that "luke" something or other - wishy-washy - lukewarm.

Let me tell you, one of three kinds of love that exists, **ἀγάπη** "agape" or unconditional love takes thick skin and a whole lot of lot of patience - especially if it means people we cannot see - or even know. We all have been faced with a dilemma since the middle of March, when suddenly churches, restaurants and stores were closed. Even hair salons. People were unable to interact with one another personally, and were forced to wear a mask, wash our hands endlessly, and get hand sanitizer. Thank God it is available again - but it, like masks, was either unavailable or the price became astronomical. It is not fun, or comfortable for many to wear a mask, but it is the agape or unconditional love that leads us to do so - in caring for people other than yourself. The worst part of this pandemic is that it cut off many personal relationships, and in some cases it has become even stricter or worse. To travel to Pennsylvania from Georgia requires a two-week quarantine before entering the state - to protect others. If you are driving from Georgia - you are going through a whole lot of states that have other regulations. People in New York and Pennsylvania are not happy with their governors with the things that they have been prescribing or commanding.

I know personally, having our services open again, and even the blessed time of Holy Communion on the porch from 12-12:30PM has opened up for many the opportunity to be connected to their church community. We have something going on now that we never even thought was on the horizon, and that is our video ministry. Our video ministry has opened up the opportunity for people who cannot venture out of their house to go to Facebook or

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YouTube and be able to watch our services in its entirety. Unfortunately, our GoPro camera went last week, it broke, and so we are back to our old camera while GoPro is sending us a new one – warranty free. So it is a little more orange this week, and I apologize for that. It maybe next week too, but GoPro will be clear and ready again soon. I want to tell you; I could give you numbers of people who have joined us in worship at Saint Andrew's. It is unbelievable the number of people that can attend our services, being connected with the larger church family has blessed – and even seeing their friends at the service. God's Word and the faithfulness of Saint Andrew's has reached 'hundreds' of people each week from all over the world. Isn't that a blessing that you are a part of that. Our fifteenth Sunday together since Pentecost Sunday, and before that – Easter Sunday 500 people were online watching the service. When it was recorded it was Marilyn, Anne, and me on a Saturday so that we could get it to at 10:30 on Sunday. I kid the Bishop sometimes when I tell him "this is not what we signed up for – it is not" but God never leaves or forsakes - He gives the ability and the possibility – as well as the opportunity for us to worship together. I am praying for those churches in California that have been shut because they attempt to worship, because they attempt to sing, and praise the Lord. Thank God we are in Georgia and we do not have such a situation. We are following all of the guidelines and doing everything that needs to be done, and more so. Hand sanitizer in every pew, every other pew closed off, people willing and blessing each other by wearing masks. Hundreds of people each week from all over the world – far more than we could ever fit in this building. No ushers have to bring extra chairs out into the aisles, we just have it online, and the Vestry has said that we are going to continue to do that. Praise the Lord.

We as a church, are presenting ourselves with love, peace, and faithfulness. Shut ins who could not normally get out to church have been attending and hearing the Word of God, watching the faithfulness, as if they were sitting in the second pew. My friends, this is the kind of love that Paul is talking about – a genuine and caring love – to truly treat others as you would want to be treated.