**September 7, 2014 – 13th Sunday after Pentecost**

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Both the reading from Romans and the Gospel passage today deal with conflict, and specifically conflict in the Church. Of course, we, today, have no idea what that’s like, right? Both of these passages seem to offer a laundry list of do’s and don’ts for us to follow, which would nip any potential problems between church members in the bud. If they were followed, that is. That’s where we run into trouble.

Jesus, especially, lays out steps to resolve conflict. If anyone sins against you, get him alone and point it out to him. If that works, yay! All is well. But if he ignores you, or blows you off, grab some backup and confront him again, this time with witnesses. This, by the way, is a very Jewish concept, from Deuteronomy, that no legal action could be taken without at least two witnesses. This would imply that the conflict Jesus is talking about is now some kind of legal action.

Then, if the person STILL blows you off, the next step is to take it to the whole assembly. And if this guy is the epitome of stubbornness and won’t even listen to the whole church, Jesus says, “…let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” And then he repeats what he said to Peter in Matthew 16, “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” In other words, if you look at it as a traditional Jewish person would, throw them out if they won’t repent. Excommunicate them. And that would seem to be an end to it.

Or is it? Matthew’s Jewish audience would certainly have strong opinions about Gentiles and tax collectors. They were the untouchables – the outcasts of society. So it would seem that Jesus was saying to shun these unrepentant offenders as if they were no longer a member of the Church. But wait a sec. Is that what he REALLY means? I don’t think so if we look a little deeper.

Let’s start with the Gentiles. In the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, up until the story of the Canaanite woman, Jesus’ focus was on the Jews. But that changed after Matthew 15, and culminates in Matthew 28:19, where Jesus tells the apostles to make disciples of all nations, Gentiles included. The same word for “nations” in Matthew 28 – *ethne* – is the word used for Gentiles in this passage.

Then there’s tax collectors. Tax collectors were the internet trolls of first century Palestine. The worst of the worst. First of all, they were collaborators with the Roman Empire, since that was whom they were collecting taxes for. And then, if that weren’t bad enough, they often lined their own pockets with extra money extorted from the people, in addition to the legal amount of taxes paid. They lived well, but didn’t have a lot of friends.

And yet, Jesus hung out with tax collectors. A lot. Matthew, himself, was named in the list of the twelve apostles as Matthew the tax collector. One of the biggest complaints the Jewish leaders had about Jesus was that he ate with sinners and tax collectors.

There would seem to be a contradiction here. If we go by Jesus’ actions, then to treat unrepentant sinners within the community the same as you would Gentiles and tax collectors would be to continue to include them as part of the community, no matter what their sins. Try to resolve the conflict within society’s rules, certainly, but no matter what the outcome, under no circumstances are they to be tossed out or even shunned.

I realize in saying this that I’m going against two thousand years of Church history and tradition of tossing out people who don’t conform or obey. But Jesus was going against four thousand or so years of Jewish history when he said that the outcasts of society should be welcomed into God’s family in the first place, so I guess I’m in good company.

Now let’s turn to Paul’s letter to the Romans for a minute. Paul is also talking about community life, and how to deal with conflict, and he has a simple recommendation:

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

When Paul is talking about the law here, he’s specifically talking about the Torah. The Roman Christian community consisted of Jewish believers as well as Gentiles, and there was a considerable amount of conflict among them. So he’s telling them (actually RE-telling them because he talks about this a lot in Romans) that all of the Jewish laws are based on love, plain and simple. If you love your neighbor as yourself, you will automatically be following Jewish law.

For Paul, as the next part shows, it’s urgent that we, “…lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light,” because the day of the Lord is near. And to make sure that there was no misunderstanding about the use of the word ‘armor’, he tells them that armor of light is Jesus Christ.

Both Paul and Matthew are talking about conflict on a number of levels. In Matthew, Jesus talks about personal sins against one another, and Paul’s entire letter to the Romans has that as a subtext. But it isn’t too much of a stretch to extrapolate that to group against group conflict, or bringing it forward into our own century, inter-denominational conflicts, or denomination against denomination.

And yet, where does “love your neighbor as yourself” fit in these quarrels? You may have guessed that this is a trick question. The answer is “nowhere.” There is no room in God’s kingdom for anything but loving God and loving your neighbors, and all that that implies.

But we’re only human. We’re SO human. It’s seems like whenever two or three of us are gathered together, conflict is there, too. How much more could we accomplish as a species if, instead of conflict, we let Jesus in? Because he makes a pretty huge promise to us when he says:

*Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

What about, instead of putting on the black armor of defensiveness or bigotry or distrust, we put on Paul’s armor of light, the armor of Christ, and instead of putting that armor between us and each other, we put it between us and all of those negative actions that we so love to take against one another.

There’s a hymn we sing once in awhile called St. Patrick’s Breastplate that has a verse which I think describes this armor of light perfectly. It goes:

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,  
Christ behind me, Christ before me,  
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,  
Christ to comfort and restore me.  
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,  
Christ in hearts of all that love me,  
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*

What kind of world would it be if all who call themselves Christians actually carried Christ with them in the way that hymn describes? And then, what if we all, every one of us, actually DID love one another as Christ loved us, and made that the basis for all of our actions? I think that truly would be the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen.