

Come to the Table of Peace

Romans 14:10-12 and Matthew 18:21-22

Rev. Beckie Sweet

Romans 14:10-12 ~ *“Why do you pass judgment on your sibling? Or you, why do you despise your neighbor? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.’ So then, each of us will be accountable to God.”*

Matthew 18:21-22 ~ *“then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’”*

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There once was a church where the pastor and the minister of music were not getting along (of course, it was not a United Methodist Church). As time went by, this rift began to spill over into the worship service in a most creative fashion. The first Sunday in October the pastor preached on commitment and how we all should change and dedicate ourselves to the service of God. The music director then led the song, “I Shall Not Be Moved.”

The second Sunday in October the pastor preached on tithing and how we all should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The music director lead the song, “Jesus Paid it All!” The third Sunday in October the pastor preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues. The music director then led the song, “I Love to Tell the Story.”

With all that was going on, the pastor became very disgusted over the situation, and so the last Sunday of October he told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The music director led the song, “Oh Why Not Tonight?” As it came to pass, the pastor did indeed resign. On that first Sunday in November he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there and it was Jesus who was taking him away. The music director led the song, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus!”ⁱ

Our two Scripture texts this morning from Romans 14 and Matthew 18 are just snippets of whole chapters of Scripture devoted to teaching listeners what it means to be growing members of the Family of God. I strongly encourage you, when you get home, to read these two chapters in their entirety. For within those chapters you will be assured beyond a shadow of a doubt that followers of Jesus are meant to be intentional about building positive relationships with God through Christ, and with those with whom we share life. The invitation is before you today to “Come to the Table of Peace!” On the surface, that invitation makes me want to sigh in relief, for in reality I sense that peace among the human family is diminishing with each passing weak. Our table today resembles a conference table, one which is reminiscent of some found in the United Nations. Why depict the UN? It’s website states that due to its *“unique international character, the United Nations can take action on the issues confronting humanity in the 21st century, such as peace and security, climate change, sustainable development,*

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human rights, disarmament, terrorism, humanitarian and health emergencies, gender equality, governance, food production, and more."ⁱⁱ This is a body established to maintain peaceful co-existence.

Shane Claiborne carries this deeper into our Christian discipleship as he offers commentary on this 18th Chapter of Matthew, stating:

*"A counterfeit peace exists when people are pacified or distracted or so beat up and tired of fighting that all seems calm. But true peace does not exist until there is justice, restoration, forgiveness. Peacemaking doesn't mean passivity. It is the act of interrupting injustice without mirroring injustice, the act of disarming evil without destroying the evildoer, the act of finding a third way that is neither fight nor flight but the careful, arduous pursuit of reconciliation and justice. It is about a **revolution of love** that is big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free."*ⁱⁱⁱ

In my years of experience on this earth, it seems to be the forgiveness piece that trips most people up, including me. Sometimes we human beings withhold forgiveness, thinking that we may have some artificial control over the other. In so doing, we only deny ourselves true peace. Sometimes we resist accepting the forgiveness offered to us by God or by others, causing a perpetual smarting from the self-inflicted battering of the spirit because we feel so unworthy of that grace. Then we deny peace to ourselves and our relationships. Jesus, the great practitioner of grace, reminds us that **worthiness** has nothing to do with the restoration of relationships which leads to true peace. Peace is achieved when forgiveness is offered and received with no strings attached: no grudges, no harboring of resentment, no score-keeping, no withholding of trust, no self-imposed guilt. This kind of peace is achieved because forgiveness has been offered and received with faith-filled hearts.

In the church I served in Norwich, NY, there was a satellite program of the Wyoming Conference Children's Home called the Family Support Program. This program takes referrals from school counselors of 8-13 year olds who are not only at risk due to their challenging family situations, but because these kids are also in serious trouble at school. Most of these students had suffered more than one kind of abuse, had emotional difficulties, and a variety of medical diagnoses for their current state of being.

Staff in this program pick the students up at their schools at the end of the day and bring them to the church. There they are taught social skills, tutored with their homework, receive counseling, are provided with a hot, healthy meal, and have some recreation time before they are delivered to their homes shortly before bedtime. The families of these students are also offered counseling and parenting classes in order to help them relate to one another in healthy ways. I developed a profound respect for the staff of this program, and each year tried to establish a relationship with the students and their families.

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One particular evening, the kids were jumping around and an 11-year old boy jumped up on the church's park bench which had been moved inside for the winter. The bench shattered. The boy was sternly reprimanded by the staff, and made to write a note of apology for his careless actions. I was asked if I would stop by their classroom the next evening so that the boy could personally deliver the apology to me.

When I arrived in the office, the boy was sitting behind a divider, wearing what I've always called a snorkel jacket, which was zipped-up and pulled up over his head, so that I could not even see the boy's face; nor could he see me. He held the note out to me. I opened the note, which I could tell had taken this child a *looong* time to write, and I read the note out loud. Then, as I took a breath to speak, the boy flinched away from me. He was expecting to be hit. So, in calming tones, I spoke to the jacket with a boy somewhere inside, and said, "Thank you for apologizing for breaking the church's bench. I can tell it took a lot of effort for you to write this note, and I appreciate that you took the time to do this." I continued, "The good news is, the church is in the forgiveness business, and so I forgive you." And as I told the boy my belief that God forgives us each time we say we are sorry for a wrongdoing, the boy's jacket began to slide back down onto his body. By the time I was telling him about Jesus' love and his teachings about forgiveness, I could see the boy's whole head. Before I left, I asked the boy if I could shake his hand to seal the deal of forgiveness, and his bony fingers held my hand for what seemed like a very long time.

The church Trustees met later that week, and I told them about what had happened. Before I could finish, some were blurting out, "Well didn't you tell him his family should replace the bench." And, "Will the Children's Home buy us a new one?" And, "Won't someone at least try to repair it?" My response was, "I just told him he was forgiven."

That is what peace, borne of forgiveness is about – restoring a right relationship with another. If, however, we focus on what someone owes us, we tend to spend our time figuring out how to get paid back, or proved right, or punishment for harm inflicted. // On the flip side, once we have forgiven another from the heart, there is all the time in the world to put the calculator away and go for a walk, time to compare notes on what we have learned, and time to get to know one another's gifts, talents, passions, and motives all over again.

That is the **revolution of love** that invites all to "Come to the Table of Peace," Christ's peace. Amen.

ⁱ Duncan, King, "On Picking Your Battles" *adapted*.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.un.org/en/sections/about-un/overview/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Claiborne, Shane. *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (p. 382). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.