

“Sin Happens” - Rev. Jennifer Adams

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Over the last few weeks we've heard in the readings and I've talked in the sermon along themes of inclusion (remember the woman who asked Jesus to heal her daughter and he expanded the reach of God's grace?) We've considered acceptance (remember the parable about the weeds where we were told to let them grow?) And last week we took Paul's charge to the church at Rome as a model for how to be community: "let love be genuine," he told them, "Outdo one another in showing honor. Live in harmony; and so far as it depends on you, leave peaceable with all." Over the last few weeks we've been given beautiful images of a community that receives all kinds, that grows in all kinds of ways; a community that is authentic, caring, at harmony, and living peaceably with all." It has been an inspirational and hopeful build up to kick-off Sunday. And here we are, kicking off another program year at Grace Church.

But suddenly, unexpectedly and in un-kickoff like- fashion the gospel deals with a difficult thing. "But what if it isn't working?" Ugh. Reality. What happens when this beautiful vision of broad and abiding peace and love and joy comes smack up against a human beings being human beings and while the vision is strong the kingdom isn't here yet

and the temptation is to just forget the whole idea or blame that group or that group for messing it up or withdraw to a place where at least on your own you are able to live peaceably with all. On Kick Off Sunday of all times we're asked do deal with a challenging question, What happens when the church gets in the way of itself?

And maybe it's good to get it out on the table at the very beginning of the program year because I've had lots of people come to me after the shock hits them – the shock of realizing that every once in a while, even in the church there is sin. And I remember my own coming to terms with that truth and it wasn't an easy step to take but it was one of the most important steps I've taken in terms of my own ability to be present to church community. The truth is that as church we aren't purely a vision of a holy kingdom to come, sometimes we're just a big mess of humanity in a big mess of church hoping for our dear lives that the Spirit is here too. In this place just like out there we are both blessed and blundering. We are insightful and blind. We are sacred and sinful. And the beauty of this gospel passage is that Jesus treats all of that not as threat but as opportunity. Hear that difference from how this is often talked about. The problems that happen in church among us aren't a threat to our well being, but rather an opportunity for growth and a deepening of community. Jesus introduces the whole subject by assuming that sin will happen (even among the faithful,) that hurt will

happen (even between disciples) and far from any of that disabling the community of faith, he tells them that there's a Christian way to deal with it. Not by denying it. Not by avoiding it or going to someone else to tell them about it. Face to face, he tells them, that's the way to go. "If someone in the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If they listen, you have regained that one."

Now in my more cynical moments (and I do have them occasionally) I've wondered if that line is one of the least abided by in all of the New Testament. How often we choose other routes rather than the direct one. And we probably choose other options because it's hard. It's hard to bring our own hurts to someone else, let alone the one whom we believe cause it or at least contributed to it. We can manage to mobilize behind feeding the hungry. We can rise to the occasion of offering water to those who thirst. We can give shelter to those in need and we can care for the shut-ins. Not that we're experts at any of that, but at least we can get behind the efforts to do those things. But how hard is it to initiate conversation with someone whom you feel has done you wrong? How hard is it to confront someone because of a hurt you have received?

And yet, this whole passages hinges on that first step. And maybe the vision does too. How can we possibly move in the direction of large

scale peace, confronting injustice out there if we don't have the courage to name our own hurts and our own need for healing in here? How can we possibly expect the world to listen to cries for peace if we aren't willing to listen to those whom we have sinned against? In this place we get to practice what we preach, literally. Last week we talked about letting love be genuine here at Grace, and loving-confrontation is another step in that direction. Loving honestly enough to face those who have sinned against us, loving broadly enough to engage the misunderstandings we find ourselves in the middle of.

As we Kick-Off the year, while it isn't exactly flashy or glamorous, some of the important skills we can hone are the ones from the gospel today. Being able to tell our brother or sister that something they've done has offended us or even just gotten in the way of some dimension of our mission. Being willing to expose own hurts, offering them to the cause of deepening our ability to be community to one another. And being able to listen and receive and respond when we are the one who has offended.

This is big stuff. Really big. This is mature community stuff and it sets the bar high. But I have no doubt that we're up to the challenge. If we committed ourselves to even that one piece of this reading – the face to face with just that one another person – If we were to make that a

common practice of our community, we'd be an even stronger people than we are.

In his book *The Great Divorce*, CS Lewis paints a picture of hell that looks like a vast, gray city, a city inhabited only at its outer edges, with rows and rows of empty houses in the middle – empty because everyone who once lived in them has quarreled with the neighbors and moved, and quarreled with the new neighbors and moved again, leaving empty streets full of empty houses behind them. That, Lewis says, is how hell got so large – empty at the center and inhabited only on the fringes – because everyone in it chose distance instead of confrontation as the solution to a fight.

The good news in this gospel passage is that distance isn't the only option. There is another way, apparently, an alternative to putting distance between ourselves and those with whom we are in conflict. We can go to them, Jesus says, and tell them what is wrong or what we think is wrong. And when we do that we proclaim that the relationship is worth the risk. And in this place that's always the case. The relationship is worth the risk because that's what we're working for, relationship and reconciliation in Christ.

When someone hurts us or crosses us we are called to be the first to reach out, even when everything in us wants to withdrawal or fight back – still we are called to community to act like the family of God that we are. We are called to confront and make up, to forgive and seek forgiveness to heal and be healed – to throw the occasional party, a feast in the deserted center of things -- a feast with music and food and prayer and song – a gathering with such mutual love and affection outpouring that it attracts those who have set themselves up at the outer edges. A celebration that invites all to come and see just what the light, the joy, the growing ability to be peace is all about.