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St. James', Mt. Airy
9/10/17

Pentecost 14/Proper 18A
Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 149
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Today's Gospel passage from Matthew contains one of the enduring images we have of the Body of Christ: *For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

It is a promise, and also a profound reminder, that even among the changes and chances of life, God's presence in our midst abides.

But just as important, it reflects the truth that in order the **be** the Body of Christ, we have to **be** the church – **together**.

And so the heart of this Gospel passage, all the verses leading up to that last well-known and well-loved verse, are instructions for **how to be** the Body of Christ **together**.

These verses are a recognition of our human sinfulness and a tacit expectation that in our sinfulness we will hurt each other, whether we intend to or not. It is important to note, however, that while concerned with discipline, the instructions are not focused on punishment, but instead on reconciliation.¹

¹ *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 4*, pg. 45.

What makes us followers of Christ is not that we never disagree or hurt one another, but how it is that we go about addressing and resolving the issue. Communication should always be a straight line – if it looks like a triangle or square or any other shape we’re doing it wrong. And Jesus is clear about the “how” as well – we don't get to lash out at the person who sinned against us, and we don't get to sweep it under the rug and pretend it didn't happen while allowing the hurt to fester and grow into hate within us.

Instead we are called to the higher task of reconciliation – mending what is broken and restoring right relationship.

Even that last part – about the member who refuses to listen to you being like a Gentile or a tax collector to you? Instead of meaning to exile or shun a person, it is a call to radically love them all the more.

After all, Jesus often interacted with Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes, and other outsiders – talking, eating, and drinking with them. By his example he was teaching us to never give up on someone – to therefore never stop reaching out in love to them, always yearning for the grace to restore what has been broken.²

Like so many of Jesus' lessons, it is easier said than done to actually follow through on what we're being taught to do. It takes courage, and it takes community.

Part of being in a community, and specifically a Christian community, is that we are mutually dependent upon one another and we hold each other accountable. That is what I believe Jesus was pointing to with his instructions, often called the Rule of Christ, in today's Gospel.

² *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 4*, pg. 48.

To function as a group effectively we must commit to communicate with each other clearly, speak truth in love when needed, and be unambiguous about our boundaries. When this happens then we are less likely to hurt one another.

It is one of the gifts of the St. James' community that we have strong Norms in place.

When I arrived two years ago I brought with me the *10 Rules for Respect* that I had shared as a set of norms in my last two parishes. If you remember those, they are rooted in today's Gospel passage and are guidelines for clear communication and dealing with conflict.

I still hold those in one hand, while in the other holding the Norms this community developed over 15 years ago and which have become deeply embedded in our shared life.

They are: use "I" statements, be respectful of others, listen carefully, begin and end meetings on time, be understanding of others, share discomforts in a timely manner – in other words "no parking lot conversations", confidentiality, be open to the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit, and have fun!

When we set these expectations for one another – and hold each other accountable to them – then we are more fully able to live into the reminder from Paul in his letter to the Romans that the commandments are summed up in this word, "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" – or as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry puts it, "If it's not about love, it's not about God."

This kind of love is one of the things that has brought us here today. This kind of love is what founded St. James in 1888, and it's what led this community to dream, plan, and build our beautiful new building here on North Main Street.

We all still say *new*, and yet today we are celebrating 10 years here. So *new* in the long view, but old enough that we have solid roots here. To pick up on the gardening motif that was a part of many of my summer sermons – the root ball we transferred from the old building has successfully rooted here and we are flourishing.

Today, as we mark a decade here on this site, what we will be blessing at the end of this service is not just the bricks and concrete – but us the Body of Christ.

Because the church is ultimately and most essentially the **people** – those who gather in Christ's name – not the structure that houses them. And so, while we are indeed celebrating our building, what we will be blessing is the sending forth all of us to be Christ's hands and heart in this world – to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And then our service will conclude, as it does every week, with the dismissal – sending us out to live lives of love and service through that “servant's entrance” into the world.

My hope is that we will carry with us not only Christ's love, but the spirit of the Rule of Christ – that we may offer the gift of reconciliation to all we encounter.

~ AMEN ~