

**Lectionary 23 Year A 2020**  
**September 6, 2020**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As I reflected on our readings this week, especially those from Romans and Matthew, I have to be honest and admit that they nearly broke me. I couldn't help but feel overwhelming sadness as I read, and re-read, the Apostle Paul's summary of the commandments: "'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor." As I read these words, I couldn't help but feel like our culture is so far from this, that these commandments are mere pipe dreams that will never come even close to fruition.

I hear, and read, and see, day in and day out examples of hatred and fear and division and violence. Countless stories that seem to bear witness to anything except love. When people of color are murdered by police, our response isn't sorrow for the grieving family, it's, "Well, they must have done something to deserve it." When people are homeless or unemployed, our culture's response isn't compassion and service, it's to assume that they're just lazy and don't deserve our help. When nearly 200 thousand people in our country have died from an illness that is highly contagious but also preventable, our response isn't to put on a mask to protect our neighbor, it's to claim that it's a hoax or a political game, and that it's our right to do whatever we want, regardless of the consequences to our neighbor.

These aren't issues of politics, my friends. These are issues of love. *These are issues of love.* And it breaks my heart, because every time I read the news, there's another story of our failure to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And these aren't just problems for people out there in the bigger cities and urban areas. These are problems that effect our community right here. In our gospel reading today, Jesus provides us with strategies for conflict resolution that treat one another with love, dignity and respect. He says, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." If that doesn't work, bring someone with you to help mediate the conflict. And if even that doesn't work, seek counsel from the church. The goal here is to restore relationships, to give one another the benefit of the doubt, and above all, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

I hate to say it, but as a church—and as with most churches, we're not particularly good at following these instructions. I find that we are more willing to complain to our friends or grumble in the parking lots or behind closed doors, rather than address the person with whom we have a problem. And I admit, I haven't been of much help in this matter, problem-solver that I am. I've more often acted as the middleman and messenger, rather than encouraging and equipping you with tools and strategies to speak to one another directly. The problem is that when we don't deal directly with one another, even if the problem is resolved, there can still be long lasting resentment and frustration rather than reconciliation and forgiveness. While the problem has been addressed, the anger remains and continues to fester.

And so, here we are. We live our lives in the midst of a seemingly endless line of failures to love our neighbors within our larger culture, and also within this small community. And the truth is that I'm tired. I'm tired of the hatred. I'm tired of the divisions. I'm tired of the violence. I'm tired of the ignorance. And I don't know for sure, but I bet many of you are tired of these things too.

These things wear on us. They can cause us stress and anxiety. They push us to our emotional breaking point. They cloud our vision, muddle our relationships, and they cause us to lose hope.

It's hard to find hope in our world today. In a culture that is far more concerned with loving ourselves rather than showing genuine love for our neighbors, how could we possibly have hope?

In truth, if it were left entirely up to us, we would probably never find hope. But we are not alone. Jesus promises us today that "where two or three are gathered in [his] name, [Christ] is there among them." *God in Christ Jesus is the one who gives us hope*, my friends. We don't have to find it on our own. It comes to us as a gift from God. Because what we see again and again throughout the story of our faith is a God who brings life out of death, and who has the power to bring hope out of even the deepest despair and hopelessness.

God gave hope to the Israelites as they escaped from slavery in Egypt. When they reached the Red Sea, facing certain death with the Egyptian army approaching from behind, instead of leaving them in despair, God parted the waters of the sea, opening up a path for them of hope and new life.

The prophet Jonah thought that the Ninevites were a hopeless community, so far from the promises of God that nothing could save them. And yet, even through Jonah's half-hearted work in Nineveh, the community was lifted from their despair and repented. They sought reconciliation with one another and with God, and God gifted them with forgiveness and new life.

And as Jesus hung there, dying on the cross, seemingly defeated by the brokenness of the world, God reached out in overwhelming and never-ending compassion for the whole world. And God took that moment of despair and defeat and death and transformed it into one of love, and promise, and forgiveness, and life and hope for the whole world.

God gives us hope. In our world today, it might be harder to see than some of these stories from our faith, but we can look for the little things, we can look for the small victories. That's where our hope comes from. God provides these moments so that we don't become stuck in despair.

There's hope in every day that King's Kupboard is open. There's hope every time another family is fed. There's hope in every relationship repaired. There's hope every time someone stands up to support their neighbor. There's hope in every recovered person discharged from the hospital. There's hope in every declaration of remission. There's hope in every new life that enters this world. There's hope in every wildfire that is contained. There's hope in every new day that God gives us life.

Maybe this hope isn't as big or as permanent as we would like. But these small gifts of temporary hope give us a glimpse of the eternal hope that God has in store for us. We begin to see, bit by bit, the hope that comes from Christ, the hope that comes from the cross. The hope that comes from the empty tomb. The hope that comes from the assurance that no matter how things appear in our world, hatred, and division and death do not have the final say. God does. Thanks be to God. Amen.