

John Sampson
"Gathered in My Name"
Text: Matthew 18:15 - 20
Preached at KVCC
September 10, 2017

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

It's been another really difficult couple of weeks, hasn't it?

Each week I keep thinking, "OK this is the limit. It won't get crazier, and more disturbing than this week. Next week has to be better."

But here it is, another week that delivered even more unease and anxiety.

Texas and Louisiana are still recovering from Hurricane Harvey, and as the floodwaters recede the unimaginable scale of the destruction

and loss that's hit the communities impacted by the storm is becoming clearer, and clearer.

And the streams and rivers of that region haven't fully recovered to pre-storm levels and now Hurricane Irma, which destroyed whole islands in the Caribbean, is making landfall in the United States. I know we have all offered our prayers and thoughts for the people of Florida as they experience the brunt of the storm's power over the next couple of days.

North Korea denoted what it says was a hydrogen bomb, and has announced that it can miniaturize the weapon so it can be delivered atop a ballistic missile. This now puts South Korea, Japan, and possibly portions of the United States under the threat of a volatile nation in possession of the most devastating weapon ever created by humanity.

And in the midst of all this came word that the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, commonly referred to by the acronym DACA, would be rescinded. This act allowed minors who entered the United States illegally, to defer the possibility of deportation back to countries that many of them no longer call home, and granted them permits to work legally in their local communities. The rescension of DACA will impact nearly 800,000 people, who, for the most part, are integral and valued members of their neighborhoods and places of employment.

The dreams of the Dreamers have seemingly come to an end.

This week I struggled coming up with a reflection on this morning's reading because in the face of hurricanes, the threat of thermonuclear war, and a crisis in our national immigration policy it was difficult for me to see how a question of church governance and membership had anything meaningful to say to us here, this

morning. Sure, we can apply Jesus' words to what goes on in this building, between these four walls, but after this week that seems kind of beside the point, doesn't it? The words of Matthew just seem too limited to actually make much of a difference in the real world.

Translating texts from one language to another allows us to share thoughts and ideas across cultures and histories. Translated texts can enrich our lives and widen our imaginations and the possibilities of human experience. But a bad translation can hide and obscure meaning, and distort a nuanced perspective. It can turn a moment of hope into a dull and useless artifact.

And, unfortunately, I think that's what happened in our text today.

I would say that the translation we use for the Bible didn't do the authors of Matthew any favors in getting across the expansive possibilities of our text.

Our passage opens with the directive:

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.”

But hear what the opening really says in the Greek:

“If your brother sins against you, go and reprove him when the two of you are alone. If your brother listens to you, you have regained that one.”

Do you hear the difference? What seemed at first confined to issues narrowly related to members of the church, is really a universal statement that can apply to many of our most important relationships.

And when I realized that Jesus was talking about brotherhood a piece of a song jumped into my mind. And I think many of you know it. Sing along if you recognize it!

“Well, I've got a hammer
And I've got a bell
And I've got a song to sing
All over this land
It's the hammer of justice
It's the bell of freedom
It's a song about love between
My brothers and my sisters
All over this land.”

The words of Matthew are a song about the love between my, our brothers and sisters all over this land. Change the translation, go back to the Greek, and the message we heard this morning blows the walls off this building. And it becomes a hopeful and inclusive message that fully engages the complexity of where we are sitting.

Take one of the national issues I mentioned earlier and see how Matthew's message of brotherhood speaks to it. Take DACA, for example.

"If your brother sins against you, go and reprove him when the two of you are alone. If your brother listens to you, you have regained that one."

If your brother breaks the law and enters the country illegally, go and reprove him...

Doesn't this statement encompass the way our national conversation about illegal immigration has often been imagined throughout our history. There is the citizen, the one who is not only legally in the United States, but also the one who is a full member of this nation, with all rights and privileges that come with that status. The citizen refers to most everyone in this room.

Then there is the sinner, the illegal immigrant, the one who is here in our nation without being registered, without being approved, without having entered according to an authorized process. And there is often a lot of fear attached to those who are in our country illegally: fear of terrorism, fear of taking jobs from citizens, fear of drug trafficking.

And these worlds collide. The citizen and the illegal meet and that meeting is defined by an unequal power dynamic. The citizen often meets the illegal to reprove him. The citizen has the power of national, state and local law behind him. The illegal has little, if any power, or support, because being illegal means you are one of the most vulnerable in our society, often without access to legal counsel and financial means.

Through our nation's immigration policies and laws, our politicians, our local sheriffs, ICE immigration raids, and the news media, the fault of the illegal immigrant for coming to this country to find work, to escape violence and war, to have a better life, has been hammered into our social consciousness over and over again. The discussion of illegal immigration has entered higher and higher levels of government, just like in Jesus' admonition where the discussion between the brothers was first between themselves, then with a larger body of witnesses, and finally before the whole assembly. And in both the national immigration debate and the words of Matthew it seems that the illegal immigrant and the sinner haven't given into the demands of the blameless. The final solution to the intransigence of the sinner, of the illegal immigrant, is deportation, or alienation, from their community. The ultimate price to pay is the fracture and dissolution of relationship.

But is this this the only reading we can have of Matthew's passage?

Are the blameless always the ones with ultimate power? Is there no compromise available?

"If your brother sins against you, go and reprove him when the two of you are alone. If your brother listens to you, you have regained that one."

There is an ambiguity in the second statement of this passage. "If your brother listens," doesn't specify which brother is talking and which brother is listening. In a relationship between brothers, in relationships based on love and mutuality, there is conversation.

There is a sharing by both parties, and an invitation to both sides to being open to change. There isn't simply a one-sided dictate of the strong to the weak, of the citizen to the illegal.

This is what it means to be gathered in the name of Jesus.

A worker named Oscar who lives in Nicaragua and participates in a regular Bible study was asked what he thought about our passage.

He responded:

“When Christ speaks of gathering in his name he doesn’t mean they’re going to be mentioning his name but that they’ll be gathered in his spirit, in agreement with his teachings and his message.”

Christ’s teaching is a teaching of love and respect for all, especially the weak and powerless. And DACA is an example of this type of transformation enacted in a world, and a setting, that Jesus could never have imagined. In an immigration conversation that has most often demonized illegal immigrants, and has constructed the debate from the perspective of the powerful and the citizen, there was a moment when those involved in the debate actually listened to the stories of the young people who had lived in the US most of their

lives, who attended school like every other kid, who wanted to work, and who loved their new country and wanted to stay. Yes, those in power could have demanded that these young adults submit to the immigration law in place at that time, but instead the powerful listened and were changed.

In Christ's presence, both sides meet and become something different.

In Christ, mercy and compassion are shown.

In Christ, there is brotherhood all over the land.

I use the title Christ to describe this power of transformation. But as Oscar noted you don't actually have to use that name. You can describe the spirit of transformation using other names, and other traditions. What do you call the reality that can melt the hearts of

the powerful, and bring humanity to those called illegal? Whatever that name is, it is welcomed in this space.

If I didn't use the title Christ I would use the word Love. Because love is the power, is the force of attraction, that binds things, and people, and the universe together. Where sin is the power of separation, of alienation, of fracture and fragmentation, Love is its antidote. And it is the power of love that infuses our reading today. The reason that brother meets brother, that citizen meets illegal, that diplomacy is being exhausted in the confrontation with North Korea, is so that the one will be regained. Jesus, or can I say Love, invites us to have a discussion about all of the things that separate us, not to punish and not to alienate and not to deport and not to annihilate, but to regain and reconnect with our brothers and sisters.

Even in the moment of seeming fracture, there is never absolute loss. At the end of the discussions with the sinner the tragic outcome is that the sinner would be treated like a Gentile and a tax collector if he or she didn't change their ways. That sounds like the sinner would become an outcast of the community, until you remember that Jesus always ate with Gentiles and tax collectors to the point that the more strictly observant members of his community complained that he ate with sinners too much. With Jesus, with Love, you never leave the table of communion with brother and sister, with heaven and earth, with citizen and immigrant, with a vision of nations united. We are bound to each other, and we share a common story.

Where in your lives can you imagine your hearts being melted before the desperate need of another person? Where in your lives do you pray for your voice to actually be heard and considered? In which discussions in our nation's great conversation do you hope

for Love to be present? When have you undertaken the difficult but necessary work of reconciliation?

This is what it means to be gathered in Jesus' name. For Christ is here among us when we open ourselves to his power of transformation, and our ability to soften our hearts and really see the person standing right in front of ourselves not as other, but as brother, and as sister.

And gathered together in this light we can sing a song

“about love between
My brothers and my sisters
All over this land.”

AMEN.