

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – Scripture & Sermon
14th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sunday September 6, 2020

WORSHIP FOCUS: “Hypocrisy”

[Jesus said:] Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye. ~*Matthew 5:3-5*

1st LESSON: Romans 14:1-12 (NRSV)

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? 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.

2nd LESSON: Matthew 18:21-35 (NRSV)

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.

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

“So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’

“And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

“But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’

“Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’

“But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

“When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

“Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

REFLECTION: “Do You Not See The Log In Your Eye?”

Our marvellous ability to get along with each other is nothing short of miraculous. A few weeks ago, when I was visiting one of our members at Lookout Ridge, I happened to hear a resident talking with a friend out by the coffee machine about just this fact.

“It was cities that did it,” this man was telling his friend. “Before there were cities we were savages. But cities forced us to work together. And so we adapted. And we built the pyramids, created schools and hospitals and art galleries and libraries and concert halls, and sent a man to the moon.”

I was surprised to overhear this conversation. The speaker was correct. Our ability to get along is not innate. It is an adaptation that we have embraced. And, it has allowed us as a people, to build cities on hillsides that are a light to the nations, and to shoot for the stars.

And yet, because getting along is an adaptation we have made as a people -- a choice we have consciously made -- often with our faith or our ethics as a guide -- we stumble constantly. We fail to get along. And when this happens, the light gutters, and we end up shooting not for the stars, but at each other.

Getting along is miraculous, precisely because it is terribly difficult. The apostle Paul knew this. In his letters to his beloved, getting along is one of his main topics. Indeed, one could argue that it is the main topic. In each community that Paul writes to, he exhorts the members to love one another, to die to themselves, and to live for the something more that is Christ. And yet, over and over again they stumble, they quarrel, they bicker, they divide, and they fail.

In his early letters, the inability of his beloved to get along clearly angers Paul. In his letter to the Galatians, for example, he is incandescent with rage at the community’s dysfunction. But, by the time that Paul writes his final letter, Romans, Paul’s mood has shifted. When Paul writes to the Romans, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?” he is still not happy. But now, after considering this question of the members of every community he has ever visited, rather than go into attack mode, and say as he does to the Corinthians, “You crazy Corinthians!” one gets a sense that he is truly asking the deeper questions about the difficulty of human interaction.

Why do we judge? Why do we fight? Why do we end up despising each other? How can we get the guttering light of love to shine again, bend the knee together towards heaven, and sing the song together of praise and thanksgiving that true community should inspire us to raise? How do we look at the other, and sing out to each other, as Beethoven would have us do in the finale of his 9th Symphony, “friend?” How do we get our chorus to swell, and become a great “Ode to Joy,” celebrating the human family?

Well, therein lies the question.

Our faith provides us with a lot of hints about how to get along: “Loving our neighbour as our self,” “Dying to ourselves and living for Christ,” and practising outrageous acts of forgiveness.

Jesus, for instance, in our reading for today responds to Peter, when Peter asks him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” by saying: “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Yikes! Forgiving even one time is hard. Seventy-seven times is a lot of forgiving.

And then, to underscore this great difficulty, Jesus tells Peter the story of the man who goes before the judge to have his debts forgiven, who, when he succeeds in this, proceeds to refuse the same mercy to anyone who owes him anything.

I think this is an interesting parable. And I think that in this parable, we can perhaps discover one reason that getting along is so difficult. Why, when we are forgiven, can we so often not extend that same forgiveness to others?

The man who comes before that judge is clearly in need of mercy. He is about to lose all his possessions, including not only his slaves, but his wife and his children. We can imagine his passion as he falls to his knees before his judge. We can imagine ourselves saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." We can put ourselves in his place.

And yet, as soon as he receives forgiveness – as soon as his suffering is over – the man who has received this gift of grace is unable to extend the same grace to another. He seems to forget that what has been given unto him is perhaps something that he might try to grant to others.

Instead of paying it forward, he despises those who owe him, and forces them to pay.

Why might he do this? Why might we do this? Do you think the man even knows that he is doing this? Do you think he knows that his actions might be seen as hypocritical by another?

Well, he might. He might just be a callous, conniving, miserable man. And yet, he might not. Perhaps he is a neighbour, just like us.

Indeed, if we sink into this story, and remember that Paul is the one who asks that penetrating question, "Why is it that we do the very thing we hate over and over again," we can perhaps come to understand why failing to get along is so common.

When we are in debt, when we need forgiveness, when we come before another, broken and humiliated, and ask for forgiveness – we are at a low point. We are at a point that we never, ever want to go back to. Perhaps there was a time when we were in a similar place as the man in our parable, in front of a bank manager begging for a loan for our first house without any credit history or collateral. Perhaps we failed miserably at school and had to take home a terrible report card to our parents. Perhaps something in our lives broke apart, and we had to lay our shame before a psychotherapist and embark on the slow, painful work of putting our life back together. If you think of your own lives, you can probably remember such a time – the death of a spouse or child, an infidelity, a failed business or marriage, a betrayal, a disappointment, an act of violence against your person, or perhaps something that you witnessed that scared the wits out of you. All of us have had something in our lives that has needed healing.

And, if that wound has healed, the jagged edges of it have been smoothed over. We don't really notice it in our day to day life.

And yet it is still there. As a child, for instance, I was frequently beaten up by boys in the schoolyard. I don't think about this violence very often. And yet, I know that wound is still there, because if I walk by a group of teenage boys to this day, and I hear them laughing and jeering, I break out into a cold sweat. I don't want to go back there to the asphalt, and the blood, and the bruising. I don't want to relive my humiliation.

And so, I quickly cross the street. I pivot away.

I think this is what our debtor is perhaps doing when he refuses to forgive the debts of others. He is quickly remembering the pain of his humiliating meeting with his judge, and deciding that he does not want to go back to that shameful place. He despises that part of his being that took him to the judge in the first place – his failure. And he cannot bear to be reminded of that failure, even in another. Seeing his neighbour as himself in this case is too painful. It is easier to judge. It is easier to do what we are seeing increasingly in our world leaders. It is easier to pivot, and try to move the critical lens away from ourselves by attacking another.

"Mr Trudeau, why do you continually have trouble recognizing the way your privilege and entitlement gets you into ethical gray areas?"

"Well, everyone in government struggles with these issues, but I think the real trouble here is the opposition and its unrelenting insistence on this issue, to the detriment of the very real troubles this government is trying to handle."

Mr Trudeau does not want to go there.

Just as when I, as a minister, do not want to forgive other ministers who I see as having failed in their work, precisely because for me to do so involves confronting my own sense of inadequacy and my own failures. To forgive would mean going to precisely the place that I cannot bear to go myself.

And yet, to heal our souls and the soul of our nation, isn't it precisely our ethical dilemmas and quagmires that need to be probed? "Black lives matter," is a matter for our souls. The work of Truth & Reconciliation is a matter for our souls. Addressing inequality is a matter for our souls. Climate change is a matter for our souls.

Fixing our relationships with our world and each other is hard work. It is deep work. It is soul work. It is work that in many ways is pleasanter to avoid by turning our focus toward something or someone other than ourselves. It is work that requires us to face the very deep personal issues that disturb us.

"Yes, we have systemic racism in Canada, but it is nothing like the States."

"Take the log out of your eye," says Jesus, "before you fixate on the speck in your neighbour's."

Not being a hypocrite is hard. Getting along with others is hard. But love, the ability to get along with others, really starts with getting along with and accepting ourselves, including that part of us we struggle with. We can only forgive our brother and sister from the heart, as extravagantly as Jesus would have us, if we have truly accepted the forgiveness that Jesus offers us, and committed to the ongoing task of forgiving ourselves.