

Sunday September 10th, 2017
Proper 18

PRAYER: O Gracious One, you have promised that, whenever two or three of us are gathered in your name, you will be present. Today we have gathered in your name, you will be present. Today we have gathered here to claim that promise. Now, as we praise your name with our lips, let us feel your spirit in our hearts. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:31-33)

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious and loving God, Lord of all creation, in your wisdom and grace you have made us dependent upon you and upon one another. You have made us in such a way that through our fellowship with other human beings, we discover our need for communion with you. We praise you, O God, for esteeming us so highly, endowing us so richly and trusting us so fully. We are humbled by your willingness to take such risks for our growth into mature human beings. We bless you for having seen in us more than we see in ourselves and for having done better by us than we do for ourselves.

You have called us to be your witnesses. All too often, we have failed your summons. Occasionally we have hated evil, held fast to the good, and been affectionately devoted to one another. Yet we have seldom been zealous in showing honour, patient in enduring tribulation, or generous in responding to our brothers and sisters. If we have denounced the flagrant abuses of those in power over us, we have winked at the vices of those who live around us.

For all these transgressions, whether by omission or commission, we ask your forgiveness, O God. But remind us again of the high cost of your forgiveness, lest we forget the magnitude of the task to which you have called us. You have called us to preach the good news to the poor. Yet the world swarms with the poor who have never heard the good news. You have called us to liberate the oppressed. Yet half the world’s people have never known life without oppression. You have called us to set the prisoners free. Yet we continue policies that condemn persons to a life of bondage. Renew within us, dear Lord, our commitment to the victims of the world’s injustice.

Today is a special day in the life of your church; not only here at First Baptist but all over the world. Today is the day you have called us all to return from our summer adventures to renew our service and our fellowship with one another. As the programs and activities of this fellowship restart and renew in the next few weeks we pray your blessing upon all who give of their time and their hearts to serve you. As we seek your guidance on a number of issues and a number of possible ministries we pray your delicate hand will steer us in the way we should go. Protect, guide and lead our staff and volunteers as we seek to witness to our community of the wonderful love of Jesus.

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Matthew 18:15-20
“Finger Pointing”

Every once in a while, you run across something that seems so funny and ridiculous, but also contains within it a profound seriousness that speaks to our human nature. I found a piece on the internet entitled *The Doctrine of Feline Sedentation*, or more clearly, the article speculated on just what the Church of England or Anglican Church would do if the bible had included a verse that read, “*The cat sat on the mat*”.

The article goes on to say, that should such a verse actually have been a part of the bible, liberal theologians would quickly point out that such a passage did not of course mean that the cat literally sat on the mat. Also, cat and mat had different meanings in the biblical languages, and culture from today, and thus needed to be interpreted in light of these differences.

This would immediately cause a backlash from the Evangelicals. They would make it an essential condition of faith that a real, physical, living cat, being a domestic pet of the *Felix Domesticus* species, and having a whiskered head and furry body, four legs and a tail, did physically place its whole body on a floor covering, designed for that purpose, which is on the floor but not of the floor. The expression “on the floor but not of the floor” would be explained in greater detail in a leaflet.

Meanwhile, our Catholic friends would have developed a Festival of the Sedentation of the Blessed Cat. This would teach that the cat was white and majestically reclined on a mat of gold thread before its assumption to the Great Cat Basket of Heaven. This would be commemorated by the singing of the Magnificat, lighting three candles, and ringing a bell five times.

This would cause a schism with the Orthodox Church which would believe that tradition would require Holy Cat Days to be marked by six candles and ringing of bells four times. These differences would be partly resolved by the Cuckoo Land Declaration recognizing the validity of each tradition. Eventually, the House of Bishops would issue a statement on the Doctrine of the Feline Sedentation.

It would explain that traditionally the text describes a domestic quadruped superjacent to an unattached covering on a fundamental surface. For determining its significance to salvation and the second coming, they would follow the same analytical principles used in dealing with the Canine Fenestration Question (How much is that doggie in the window?) and the affirmative Musaceous paradox (Yes, we have no bananas). And so on for 210 pages. The General Synod would then commend this report as a helpful resource for clergy to explain to laity in the pew the difficult doctrine of the “cat sat on the mat.”

(weird/wild/web/jokes)

What a silly thing this article is. Yet, how very serious is the issue it is poking at. The church since its inception has bred all manner of schism and dissension. It began right back in the bible, with arguments over whether believers needed to be circumcised, or whether it was okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols.

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Now as important as denominational differences, or theological arguments are, the reality is that most of the schisms that you and I experience in the church, have their source in much more mundane sources.

All of us have on occasion heard, or even lived through church squabbles over everything from carpeting and elevators, to anger over someone sitting in our favourite pew, or taking our favourite parking spot. Rarely, does a theological discussion erupt in a church meeting, but complaints such as about the kind of toilet paper used in the church washrooms, or quality of the coffee served, and who served it, are far too common.

The question then becomes, what do I do with my sense of being offended by my brother or sister? It is a subject that we talk about far too infrequently. Mostly we avoid the subject because it makes us very uncomfortable. We would rather pretend that everything is “hunky dory”, while all the while we are seething inside. It is rather like a bulletin cartoon that I saw several weeks back.

It pictures the committee secretary reading the minutes of the previous meeting and concluded with these words. “The meeting adjourned, and the members assembled in the parking lot to say what they really thought.” We laugh but sadly it is somewhat truthful.

Well to begin with in our approaching this uncomfortable subject, you would think that by our experiences in the church that people must be reading a different version of the bible than the one we read this morning. Rick Morley writes that this mysterious bible from our collective experience seems to say things like “if another member of the church sins against you...just talk about them behind their back.”

Or, “If another member of the church sins against you...just call a bunch of people in the church to complain about them. You may even want to start a letter-writing campaign against them. If another member of the church sins against you...just send them a nasty email, or tweet to your friends and copy it all to your Pastor and denomination. If another member of the church sins against you...don’t say anything.

Just avoid them. Un-friend them on Facebook. And if you can’t avoid them on Sundays, then leave the church.” Is that what your bible says? Well mine doesn’t, and these bibles in the pews say something completely different. In fact, the whole eighteenth chapter of Matthew is all about getting along as a community of faith. Jesus’ approach is so radically different than the one we might immediately employ.

This is most certainly due to the fact that our goal in confronting our brother or sister may not be Jesus’ goal. When we employ our nasty responses to each other, like dragging someone’s name through the mud, we often act out of revenge, out of spite, out of a twisted sense of justice or entitlement. When a sister or brother sins against us, we want to strike back, and cause them the same pain we experience, maybe even more.

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This reaction occurs, because we have been so conditioned to act this way. In every human interaction, we have in the world, we are bound to run into people who thoughtlessly, or even deliberately, try to ruin us. In business, our competitors run our name and work to the ground. Our fellow employees try to make themselves look good by belittling our good name, or by taking credit for our work.

It begins when we are children with sibling rivalry, or in schoolyard squabbles on the baseball diamond. However, and I cannot stress this enough, our relationships with fellow believers is special. Notice that Jesus is giving his instruction to relationships among believers, not about our relationships with unbelievers. That doesn't mean we shouldn't seek to respect and care for everyone, believer or not; it just means that church relationships are special.

Actually, I am beginning to suspect that they are actually more challenging than many of our relationships. Jesus' goal in all of this is so unique, so counter to our worldly selfish motivations. Jesus calls on us to respond to our hurts by the hand of others, with the same grace he demonstrated throughout his life, and most certainly on the cross. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing."

Even on the cross, Jesus was seeking to reconcile others to himself. As Christ demonstrated, our relationships as his people are to be marked by forgiveness, peace, and mercy. If these qualities are absent in our fellowship, then we have ceased to be a church in any discernable fashion. And frankly, when these elements are missing in how we treat each other, we are all aware that something is fundamentally wrong.

"If another believer sins against you"; perhaps we better understand this phrase first. Most of our frictions in life begin not with sin, but with unmet expectations. Even in the church, whether we admit it or not, we have expectations. Sometimes the expectations arise because of habit, "we've always done it that way." Sometimes expectations arise because of a false sense of entitlement, "I have always sat in this pew".

When our sense of expectation goes unfulfilled, it is like the itch demanding to be scratched. If we do not confront our expectations for what they are, that is they are selfish and ridiculous; then we are in danger of causing and experiencing untold misery and suffering. If someone irritates me because they took my favourite seat, they have not sinned against me.

However, if I grumble and say nasty things about them behind their back to someone else, then I have sinned against my brother or sister. The very best thing we can do every time we enter this place, or encounter our brother or sister in Christ, is immediately see them as Christ sees them. Every one of us is a beloved child of God. Christ died to redeem every one of us.

If Christ was willing to die for my brother or sister, shouldn't I be willing to die to myself for their benefit as well. The Apostle Paul in the second chapter of Philippians approaches the subject in a powerful way.

He writes, *"Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and sympathetic?"*

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Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one heart and purpose. Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing."

And then the kicker, *"Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross."* (Phil. 2:1-8)

This is so different from the world, and how we have been conditioned to deal with people. So many of our decisions in life are based on what I can gain, what I can preserve for myself, with nary a thought to anyone else. Even modern advertisers have picked up on this with their slogans. McDonalds used to say, "You deserve a break today." Did you hear that? "You deserve." "At Speedy you're a somebody."

It's all about me. All about what: I deserve, are entitled to, my rights, what is fair regardless of the consequences to someone else and my relationship to that other person. It's hard to get past this self-focus. It is so pervasive in our society and our own hearts. Brothers Tommy and Jake had just finished their lunch when their mother placed a plate with fresh baked cookies on it, instructing the boys they could have only one.

Tommy, being the older brother announced that he should choose his cookie first, which Jake immediately declared as being unfair. Thus, an argument ensued as to who should choose first. Mom intervened and spoke to Tommy suggesting that he should be like Jesus and let his brother choose first. To which Tommy replied, "I think it is Jake's turn to be Jesus today."

How much we are like Tommy and Jake. We want other people to act like Jesus, but we desire to leave the selfless giving to others. Rarely do we truly want to humble ourselves towards others. In fact, when we see someone taking the position of humble servant it is so rare we are surprised by it. Jesus indicates that it should be a regular occurrence, a natural environment of his community of people.

One of my favourite stories to illustrate how we should interact I heard many years ago. There was a Baptist Church that was the pride of the city and the denomination. Its large sanctuary was packed every Sunday by prominent people and their families. The families that came always wore their finery, and no child ever misbehaved in the service. The service ran like clockwork, ending as expected on time so people could get to lunch.

Even the offering collection was choreographed like a Broadway performance. And overseeing it all was the chair of the Deacons Board. He was well meaning man who saw it as his "God given" duty, to preserve the decorum of the church service. After all, it is what everyone wanted and expected. However, as we know, all it takes is one small pebble to cause ripples in a calm pond. On one Sunday morning, with the church packed as usual. A young man appeared at the church, just as the service began and everyone was seated.

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He was different than everyone else in that he came with long scruffy hair, cut off jean shorts and an unkempt beard. He would be described as a kind of hippy. The young man stood for several moments scanning the packed church and everyone scanned him in return. He slowly made his way to the front but there simply was no empty seat. When he finally made it to the front, the only empty space was on the floor right in front of the pulpit and that is where he sat.

A murmur immediately arose in the usually staid congregation, and then things got real interesting as the head deacon rose from his usual seat, and made his way to the front. Everyone froze in anticipation as to what the deacon would do. The minister was turning white. What would he do? Drag the young man out by his long hair. The deacon stood next to the man, and whispered something to him.

The young man smiled, he actually smiled. Then the two men shook hands and then to everyone's surprise the head of the deacon's board, knelt down and rolled into a seated position beside the young man and waited for the service to continue. There wasn't a dry eye in the house, and the minister was so flustered he could barely speak, but anyone who was there that day said they had one of the best sermons ever and without any words being used.

How are we doing in treating one another? Are we Christ-like to one another? For our sake and for the honouring of Christ, I truly hope so.