

Sermon for Pentecost 18 (Proper 19A)
Christ Church, Andover
September 14, 2008
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Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Good morning, Christ Church! Sure is great to see you all here this morning. We missed some of you around here this summer! And we welcome those who are new among us as well. It's really great to have the family back home – old-timers and newcomers alike.

Having the family all together here today fits really nicely with what Paul has to say about community in his epistle to the Romans, and what Jesus is teaching his disciples in the gospel today about *community* and about *forgiveness*. But before I get ahead of myself, let me start by asking you a question. I don't want to put you on the spot, but I want to ask what you think about all these people here that you go to church with! Are the people you go to church with in any sense "special" to you? By that, I mean, do you feel a kind of companionship with them? Or are they strangers? You see people at church, but do you really know them? Do you feel a common bond with them? Do they *feel* like family to you?

You don't have to answer that question right now – just think about it for a minute.

I grew up in a church where we called everyone "brother" or "sister," and while I can't say that we always felt like family to each other, or that we always felt close to or got along with everyone perfectly, there was definitely a sense of family about that place. As we all know, just because you're family doesn't mean you always get along perfectly, does it!

I went to see my parents a few weeks ago in my hometown in the Midwest, and I stopped one day to see Sister Slattery, the 91 year old widow of our pastor when I was growing up. I dropped by unannounced, as people where I grew up still do, knocked on her front door, and when she came to the door I said, "Well, hi there, Sister Slattery," in my best, friendly Hoosier accent. Big smile came on her face. To her I was still the little guy that had grown up on the pew there at Gethsemane twice every Sunday and usually a couple of nights a week in between. We were all like family, and there was something kind of nice about that. She knew me better and probably saw more of me than some of my relatives did.

I tell that little story, because Jesus speaks about the church being a community of brothers and sisters.

Unfortunately, in its attempt to avoid gender-specific language, the NRSV loses the sense of brother/sisterhood conveyed by the Greek word *adelphos* – a brother, a beloved one, someone who is special to you. Instead it translates it “member of the church.”

“Member of the church.” Member. Someone who belongs, yes, but that could mean someone who fills out a membership form, or pays their dues. Just not the same as referring to that person as a brother or a sister.

Jesus is talking to the disciples here about forgiving one another. Now in other places, of course, he deals with relationships beyond the church (such as when he says to “Love your enemies” in the Sermon on the Mount), but this text is about forgiving your Christian brothers and sisters, the people you worship with, go to parish suppers with, work on committees with, attend a Bible study with, do outreach with, or just share a pew with on Sunday mornings.

Now I know that not everyone here today feels that kind of familial relationship with Christ Church – at least not yet. Some of you have been around forever, know the family history, and know where all the bodies are buried (so to speak). Others have jumped in more recently and are finding your way into this family – sort of like a new in-law perhaps, who learns the ropes, wondering exactly how you fit in or whether you’ll be accepted, but making your own mark on the family at the same time, helping enlarge it and helping it become an even more interesting and diverse place. Others are more like a new puppy in the family, just automatically loving everybody and being loved by everyone in return. And then some of you might have just shown up at the family picnic. Maybe you were invited by someone. Perhaps you were driving by and we looked like a nice family to hang out with. Maybe you’re part of our extended family from away, or from another branch of the family, but we’ve just never met you personally until now. Maybe you’re totally unconnected, and just popped in because you found yourself wondering what this church thing was all about.

Whatever the case, everyone is welcome!

We know from the recent Pew Research Center’s study on religion in America that things are very much in flux when it comes to religious identity in this country. People make choices about their religious affiliation that may not have anything to do with what church they grew up in, or whether they grew up in church at all. Religious identity is a much more fluid thing than in the past.

That fluidity could be mapped right here at Christ Church. We come from all different backgrounds, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and a variety of other religious traditions, and some who were never a part of any religious group before they came here. And it’s true, too, that

not everyone who grew up here in the Episcopal Church or has been a part of Christ Church has stayed.

We know from the Pew study – and from our experience – that people have all kinds of reasons for leaving or changing churches. Some are tired of the Church telling them what to do and what to think.

Others are tired of the Church being wishy washy, and wish it would just tell it to us straight... You know, lay down the law! Tell us right from wrong!

Others are turned off by the perceived hypocrisy of people they thought were supposed to be so righteous, and find that church people are pretty much like people everywhere – still not perfect, even if we're trying hard. Sometimes we hurt each other, or step on each others' toes. We sometimes have differences of opinion about things, whether it's the color of the front doors or the way we vote.

Our gospel today from Matthew underscores the importance of not being too harsh with one another when we do have differences – and we will. We've got to cut each other some slack! Don't expect your brothers and sisters in the church to be perfect, or to always agree on everything. Let's have some give and take, Jesus seems to be saying. You have to forgive others when they offend you, even (Jesus says) as much as seventy-seven times. Which was just another way of saying, "stop counting!" If you're keeping track, you've missed the point!

Forgiving one another – a very important part of what it means to be a family.

Now I know we have to be very careful when we talk about forgiveness! People raise all kinds of objections to the whole idea. "It doesn't help anybody if we just keep forgiving and let someone walk all over us," we argue. What about the person who never seems *to recognize their need* for forgiveness? Do we forgive them, too? Aren't we just enabling bad behavior when we forgive someone?

Well, let's be clear. Forgiveness is not a blank check on bad behavior! Even in the parable that Jesus tells in today's gospel, there is accountability. The one who is forgiven has to also do something if that forgiveness is going to have any meaning or effect. Jesus even told us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

So, what really *is* forgiveness, then? Forgiveness is, first of all, the refusal to hurt the one who has hurt you, because for you to hurt another person does as much (or more!) damage to *you* as it does to the other. Another way of saying it is that "forgiveness is the refusal to allow the actions of others to shape your life and control your behavior." Let me say that again: forgiveness is the refusal to allow the actions of others to shape your life and control your

behavior. In forgiving another person, we let go of the poison of resentment and hostility that eats away at us, and causes us spiritual harm by causing us to feel or act in ways that are not motivated by love.

We have lots of opportunities to practice this kind of letting go, whether in the church or in our families or places of work.

Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, acknowledges that we will have differences with each other. He even acknowledges that we church people don't always believe or practice the faith in the same way – and yet, we all serve the same Lord.

I like to think of the church as an alternative community where we get to practice living the way the world ought to be. We come each week to sing and pray, to listen, to learn, to lift our hearts to God who alone is our judge – and to practice living in community with one another in a way that shapes a new way of being for us and for our world. Like a family, we share a meal together here at this table each week, remembering as we do the one who accepts us for who we are, hoping we'll remember to do the same for others.