

September 6, 2020

Rev. Tambria E. Lee

Pentecost 14

St Paul's

May only God's Word Be spoken and only God's Word Heard,
Amen.

You identified them by their choice of color: black. Their cars were always ford sedans. They wore simple homemade suits and shirts. Their wives wore caps made of white mesh and their children always wore dresses with skirts below their calves. They owned half or more of Washington County and the largest grocery chain in the state was theirs as well. I had never seen such a religious sect until I moved to Maryland and while they were visible in our rural community, they were more visible by their religious practices many of which are similar to the Amish community in Pennsylvaniathe practice of radical forgiveness and in some sects the practice of shunning. I have no doubt that Matthew's Gospel figured heavily into this doctrinal observance but shunning was a whole different matter especially since it wasn't always practiced in the way scripture envisionedI learned about its effects from a woman we will

call Hattie. She grew up in a Mennonite family wearing long dresses and riding in black cars and she was a victim of shunning. We were standing in her garden early one morning -- -honestly she grew the best the green beans I ever ate... when she told the tale of how she had been hauled in front of the church for dating someone outside of the community. Given that the community was known for marrying within...in some cases way too close for comfort she had fallen in love with a young Italian man named Joe who was now our church's deacon. He was perpetually happy and loved to play the guitar badly but was as good as gold and she knew it...they didn't think so...they followed the instructions explicitly in the Gospel...you share your grievance with the offended party....her parents had gone to her and explained how hurt they were and bothered by this breach in community...when Hattie refused to stop dating Joe and tried to get them to see what a good man he was ...they gathered together the elders of the community and went through the same ritual....she told them the same thing.....the next week in church...the church confronted her and when she refused to stop dating him...one by one the community stood up and turned their back on her....it was she said as if she died then and there....she walked out and never looked back. I am reminded of Bishop Don Camara who told his catechists....watch how you live...your lives may be the only Gospel your hearers will ever read.

Hattie eventually was able to be in relationship with her parents and while she never forgot that experience, it did shape how she came to understand being in relationship and the power of two or three gathered. Sometimes two or three gathered may well be two or three sets of two or three all of whom invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What God's intention for us to hear today from this passage I believe is this.....we live not for ourselves alone but we live in community...what we do to one another within the community matters....holding a grudge, a serious concern, or a grievance which you refuse to work through or let go of matters to those against who you hold it and to the communities in which they live...your carrying of it...poisons the environment in which you live and move and have your being hence it eventually poisons your community. Is it easy to do this work of reconciliation? No.....Does it always work out perfectly...no.....does that mean you shouldn't try?....no

You will hear next week that you are to forgive seventy times seven or in other words there is to be no limit on your capacity to forgive and to seek forgiveness. Because to forgive in one sense of the word is what distinguishes you as Christian....you are forgiven by God and now you are to forgive...forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.....your capacity to forgive will be intimately connected to your capacity

to forgive yourself....if you can show no mercy to yourself or anyone else then God will have hard time offering you God's mercy because there will be no way for you to receive it....you will be right perhaps in your observations about who is at fault but you will not be in relationship....

If you are like me, you like the concept of working out issues with others but that seems particularly difficult when you are more sinned against than sinning...those who know me well know I love to be right...sometimes I want to be right more than I want to fix what's broken . Am I proud of that...no...am I working to change it...absolutely ...what does it cost me....some days a lot of humility which instead of making me feel strong leaves me feeling vulnerable...like I let them off the hook.....this is not the same as walking past or ignoring a grievous sin....it is not about forgoing consequences for actions that harm....it is about not letting those actions continue to harm us by holding onto them as if they were sacred....it is letting it go...dropping it ...so that you and the person who has harmed you can see it in a different light and then work it out.

Think this day of who you are and how you live.....are you fed up with a friend? Have you had it with a neighbor.... They with you? What about your spouse or your child and that ongoing argument that seems to be heavy laden with sins past and yet to come....trust that God can be in the midst of it....instead of

blaming when you approach someone to talk about what they have done that has hurt you....reframe your comments and say instead.....my feelings are hurt by_____and it is getting in the way of my relationship with you...what can we do to repair the breach....remember mercy is best experienced not merely talked about....will it come out right every time....no...but it counts to have tried. Your life and how you live it may be the only Gospel people ever see.