

Ordinary 23-28

Parables for the Healthy Church, by Eradio Valverde

September 7, 2008

Exodus 12:1-4; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

There once was a man rescued after several years on a deserted island. As they checked the man's health, one of the rescuers wanted to know about the three huts the man had built. The man replied, "The first one is where I lived, the second one is where I first started going to church, but then I got mad, and so the third hut is my new church!" Funny, but sad. Sad, but true. As we yearn to have a healthy, vibrant church, the reality is that being composed of humans, our churches are filled with human problems.

As Jesus speaks to his disciples about life, greatness, and our temptation to sin, he shares an important lesson in having a healthy church: We must communicate with one another. The temptation for many of us is to take our anger to a friend whom we know feels the same way about the person in question. Our discussion will only fuel the anger we had in the first place. Jesus knows the secret is to take our matters directly to the person involved, and try to find a resolution to the problem. Others can get involved if the first meeting does not bring resolution. So powerful is God's interest in our ability to communicate openly and freely with one another that Jesus says heaven is involved. The "binding" on earth results in a "binding" in heaven. The need for effective communication is so important that Jesus says, "If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." The icing? Jesus' promise to be among those gathered in his name.

Paul's comment to the church in Rome was to remember the greatest debt we can have with each other is the debt of love. The very heart of

the Ten Commandments is love; love for God, love for self, and the love for others in the same way we should love ourselves. To follow and live in the way of love brings God's "armor of light." The healthy church will resist evil and replace it with love for God and one another.

September 14, 2008

Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

How precious is the space we place around ourselves as that which should not be violated. We may let certain people "in," but keep other people "out." We may let family "in" to places we dare not let "friends" see, but it all boils down to the day someone wrongs us. It can take the form of an unkind word that may have been said in jest, but stings and hurts nonetheless. It can take the form of a thoughtless gesture or malevolent action. Regardless of the way it comes, we have all been there—hurt, sad, angry, not knowing what to do and weighing our options for recourse, be it revenge or retaliation.

Peter had been there and must have given the "f" word—forgiveness—some thought. Peter knew the rabbinical teaching mandated forgiving three times. Some would say that is three too many, others might say it is not enough. In a balanced sense three seems to be a nice way to live: "I'll forgive you this time. Okay, I'll forgive you this second time, and finally, I'll forgive you this third time, but that's it!" After his years with Jesus, Peter knew that Jesus was all about forgiveness so Peter thinks he has a wonderful formula that will impress the Lord: Lord, should I forgive someone who sins against me seven times? It does not take a mathematics major to know what Peter

had done. He took the rabbinical formula of three, doubles it, and adds one for good measure. He shares that with Jesus and perhaps awaited Jesus' praise. Jesus replies that one must forgive another not seven times, but "seventy-seven times;" that is, a number that one cannot keep track of.

Before Peter gets lost in his thought about that big number of forgiveness, Jesus shares a story. The story involves money and debt. Such topics catch our attention, whether they come in a parable or a late-night infomercial on how to get rich and get out of debt. Jesus' story wasn't about striking it rich, however. It was about forgiveness of debts, and how important it is in our physical, emotional, and spiritual lives. Think about the last time you found it hard to forgive someone. The more you thought about it, the angrier you got. And it made you even angrier as you discovered that the person who made you angry wasn't even thinking about you. He or she was already on with his or her life, and you're the one left holding the weight of that anger. Jesus knew that to forgive was to receive back into your life the fullness of life. The same is true for the healthy church. Church members must learn to forgive one another. If we do not, God will show us the same treatment as we have shown others.

S eptember 21, 2008

Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6;
Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Ah, the innocence of childhood! Summers were spent running, bike riding, swimming, and yes, going to Vacation Bible School. Never would a summer go by when we did not look forward to attending our little church's VBS. One of those summers I learned an interesting song that went something like, "Don't do a half-day's work for the Lord and expect a full-day's pay." The next line said something to the effect, "Only what's done with all of your heart will count on Judgment Day." I loved the melody and still know it to this day. I tried singing it from memory, but could not. I went to the wonderful world of Google and could not find the lyrics. I called one of the former music persons from our General Board of Discipleship and she

was, she claimed, too young to remember such a song. I called a colleague who grew up in the Rio Grande Conference with me, and he remembered the closing words. As we look at the words of this song now, with theological eyes, the song does not mesh with what Jesus is saying in this passage of Matthew.

Jesus is sharing a radical idea: Those who get hired at 9 a.m. will get the same pay as those hire at five p.m. Not a great deal for the early birds, but a wonderful idea for those who like to sleep in, have a nice lunch, do whatever they want, and—oh yes—maybe find a job. Imagine going to an employer at five o'clock and trying to get hired at that hour. Yet, the song and the passage really do not have as much to do with work as they do the relationship Jesus invites us to have with him. Jesus is stating that all, no matter how early or late in life that come to him, will find a friend.

Some of us as children endured church-going as a result of a "drug" problem. As we say in Texas, "Daddy drug me to church." As a result, many of those "drug" to church found an early relationship with Jesus. Others have come later in life and have found the same love and compassion that Jesus offered to the early birds. And all, regardless of entry date and time, will receive the eternal reward of life in heaven.

This works well in the theological and spiritual realm. The reality in churches is that "long-time" members do not easily open up to "newbies." A healthy church will be one that encourages all to come in, and to feel at home. And the older, established members will welcome and love those just in as much as they love those who have been there for years. Such is the realm of God's love through Jesus for God's church.

S eptember 28, 2008

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16;
Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:33-46

No other course in seminary frightened me more than my preaching course. My biggest argument with God as God called me to ministry was this very issue. A shy person by nature finds it hard to be called to do the very thing that causes that

shyness. My answer was a conditional yes, if God could change my heart and my shyness. Yet, even in seminary, enrolling in this preaching course, I had more fear than I considered normal. God uses wonderful men and women to teach those hard courses, and my professor on the first day dedicated the lecture to speaking about authority. Among the “fear questions” I was asking was, “What gives me the right to preach to anyone?” Dr. Grady Hardin told us that day that “anyone who shows up” to hear one preach “has given you that authority to preach.”

Jesus’ authority was always questioned by those who did not like him. The religious folks were especially fond of trying to trick or trap Jesus. So, Jesus told them a story and then asked them a question. The story was one of a man having two sons. The father went to the first and asked him to go and work in the family vineyard. The son’s response was that he would not. But, he changed his mind and went and worked as requested. The father went to the second son and asked the same of this son. The second son said he would, but did not. Jesus’ question to the religious leaders was “Which of the two did the will of his father?” Jesus’ response to their answer astonished them, for Jesus said that the ones thought not worthy of God’s realm would be the very ones to enter first.

God gives us authority to serve. To serve means our willingness to put others first. To serve God means to put God first. Whoever shows up at our church is giving us authority to serve them. God has given us in the church a responsibility and an authority to meet both their spiritual and physical needs. We are sent by God to make new disciples and to strengthen those already in our ranks. Ours is the call adopted by our last General Conference: To make disciples for the transformation of the world.

October 5, 2008
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

The healthy church is one who recognizes the unique role it plays in the community. We are unlike any other organization in town, because

our purpose is to minister to the spiritual needs of others. Dr. John Deschner, a member of our conference and professor of theology at Perkins, said upon his retirement, “Never forget that what distinguishes us from others is that we are the only ones who can offer Word, water, light, bread and cup.” That’s the prophetic powerful presence and nature of the Church.

The passage from Matthew has Jesus continuing with his parables about God and God’s realm. In this one, Jesus spoke about his role. A landowner planted a vineyard and secured it with a fence. He then leased the land to tenants and went to another country to continue his business dealings. When it was time to collect his rent, he sent his servants to collect. Those servants were subsequently abused; one even died. Other servants were sent and met the same fate. The landowner finally decided to send his own son, with the thought that his son would be respected because of his heritage. The tenants instead treated him the same, thinking that by killing the son they would get his inheritance. Jesus then asked what would become of those tenants, and answered that they would suffer a miserable death and the land would be leased to others with hopes to secure the harvest the landowner believes is due.

We are these others. God has tasked us with bringing in the harvest. Ours is the Lord Jesus to share with others. A healthy Christ-centered and Christ-led church will continue to offer opportunities to reach the lost, sowing seeds of the gospel that may yield a bountiful harvest. Its programs, its ministries will all be done in a manner to reach those who have not yet heard. The harvest is ready. Are we?

October 12, 2008
Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

Most pastors have either officiated or participated in some incredible weddings. Ask the couple why they want to wed and the answer will almost always be, “We’re in love!” Fair question and fair, if not unrealistic, answer. Weddings can bring out the best and worst in people. Weddings can bring

out the best and worst in both the mother of the bride and the mother of groom, but that's another sermon for another day, perhaps for another pastor. Today's passage deals with a celebratory church. A healthy church is one who knows how and when to celebrate.

Jesus' story in the Matthew passage is about a lavish wedding given by a king. Most of us in the United States do not know what it is like living in a monarchy, but thanks to television and the marvels of satellite communications know the lavishness of English weddings and sadly, funerals. In a way, the weddings are not only for the royal family but for all those gathered outside. Most of us of a certain age remember the nuptials of Prince Charles and Princess Diana. The merchants made a fortune in selling commemorative shirts, plates, photos, etc. Anyone who was anybody received an invitation and more than likely did not turn down the chance to be present for the ceremony and certainly the banquets that followed.

As Jesus tells this story, those hearing it for the first time imagined what it must have been like to receive an invitation and then to reject it. The king's son is getting married... what loyal subject in his/her right mind would turn down this once-in-a-lifetime invitation? Well, those in the story do. Jesus' story has them turning down the invitation not once but twice, even after the menu is shared with them. I chuckle when I receive an invitation to dine with someone at their home and my natural inclination, which I usually resist, is to ask, "What are you serving?" Here the menu is oxen, fatted calves, and all the trimmings. To add insult to injury, those invited grabbed some of those sent by the king and "mistreated them, and killed them."

The passage from Exodus 32 reminds us that in the people's reaction to Moses' leadership and God's faithfulness. The king in Jesus' story responded in a most violent way and destroyed those who killed his servants. He then made the invitation one for all the people of the kingdom. Everyone was invited, "both good and bad." And those invited had to be attired appropriately.

Those found naked of that which identifies them as being in relationship with God will not be let in. This passage closes saying, "Many are called, but

few are chosen." May the healthy church respond with a willingness to invite any and all, and work to help each person become clothed appropriately in love, spirit, and truth.



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