Be Ye Telios

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Matthew 18:15-20 ~ September 10, 2023

Call me old school, but most days I am glad we don’t have our worship projected up on big screens. I’ve been to churches with images projected – sunsets, waterfalls, happy children, Jesus, and all. But today, I wish we had a big screen so we could all look together at Google Earth. If you are not familiar with it, Google Earth provides satellite photography. You can zoom out or in as you wish. You can see the whole planet, or zoom in, ever closer, until you get all the way down to the house where you live. You can even see if you’re parked out front that day.

I was looking the other day at us, at St. Columba’s, thinking about our priority to embrace our neighbor and wondering how far and to whom that neighbor-love extends. With an aerial view, it easy to see how we’re an integral part of a lovely tree-filled residential neighborhood, and easy to see how we are on a major urban artery, with direct access and connection with the rest of the city, and the regions beyond.

I’d like to believe that what we are doing here, in and from this place, as we are gathered, fed, and sent by God… I’d like to believe that we are nurturing a little microcosm of beloved community. I’d like to imagine that if the camera zooms out a bit and you look at this city or this planet, you would see little points of light, sparkling, emanating love. One of those little points is us. Our vision to Live God’s Love affirms, “We will build relationships with our neighbors and the wider community to pursue bold action toward systemic change that addresses underlying inequities in our society and creates “The Beloved Community.”

I wonder…, do we begin this nurturing from within – within me, within you, within the heart of each one of us? Or do we begin out…, with awareness of the created world beyond – where Google Earth will illumine places torn right now by earthquake, war, plagued with drought, neighborhoods with no health clinic or grocery story, or running water. As well as snowy mountains, fertile plains, ocean depths. On certain days, we might feel that our deepest calling is to attend within, with inner peace. And the next day that, above all, we are called to seek peace in the world. Most religions hold these two in life-giving tension: both, and – contemplation and action. Peace within; love the world.

This summer I read The Spirituality of Imperfection. Shaped in part by the wisdom of Alcoholics Anonymous and twelve step programs, a spirituality of imperfection is found in every religious tradition. It “speaks to both the inevitability of pain and the possibility of healing *within* that pain.” Seen in this light, failures, imperfections, experiences of brokenness do not always get fixed; rather, they are part of what it means to be human.

That may not sound like big news, but we invest a lot of energy acting as if it were otherwise, putting on a shiny face; presenting ourselves as if we’ve got it all together. Allowing our selves to accept and dwell with our imperfections, openly – with ourselves, with God, with others – can be deeply freeing and grace-filled. To acknowledge that life can be hard, we hurt others, others hurt us, we fall far short, yet here we stand; to name it is simply to name what is true.

In the first centuries of the Christian era, the desert mothers and fathers discerned a wisdom, subsequently embodied in twelve step programs: that in *our* brokenness we need to be with others who are willing and able to acknowledge *their* brokenness. When I am broken, instead of seeking someone who can “fix” me, I seek someone who is themselves broken, and will own up to it. Telling the truth is a gift. It awakens to our mutuality, our interdependence; it is holy. Maya Angelou put it succinctly: “nobody, but nobody can make it out here alone.”

Let’s look at today’s Gospel passage first in context. Early in Matthew’s Gospel, in an agenda-framing passage that includes the beatitudes, Jesus gives lots of instruction and concludes, “Be perfect, therefore, as God is perfect.” ‘Well, God, that’s a tall order.’ It’s also an imperfect translation: of the Greek, *telios*, which means whole or complete. Seek then, to become whole, to integrate all the disparate parts. Be *telios*, as God is *telios*.

Today’s text is part of a larger discourse addressing life in community. Jesus covers what seems like some basic stuff: be humble, seek the lost, care for the poor, welcome the children, forgive people when they hurt you, and today: If someone hurts you, offends you, go and tell them; try to take care of it one on one. If that works, you’ve got a friend. If not, take a couple of others and try again. If there is still no resolution, bring it before the entire community.

A few observations about this primer in conflict mediation, conflict resolution:

It is straightforward. It is specific – steps one, two, three. Why? Maybe because we need to hear it. Just do it. When someone offends you…, do *this*. We are often inclined to avoid conflict, to try and overlook it or brush it aside. How many say, “I am conflict averse”? Addressing conflict, seeking resolution is hard. It calls for us to be vulnerable, speak clearly, risk upsetting the other, to listen deeply and well. Jesus says, ‘do not avoid conflict; address it with intention and care.’

Two, our tendency when we’re hurt is to blame and begrudge; turn the other into a monster, ascribe to them all manner of horrific attributes. Then, instead of resolving the matter, we have an enemy; can seek revenge and retaliate. And that feels far easier, somehow, than actually resolving differences.

Three, Jesus’ concern is not with determining who is wrong or right, guilty or innocent. Jesus’ concern is repair of the relationship and restoration of the community, a community that takes seriously its mutual interdependence and integrity. When he concludes, “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” Jesus affirms that being honest about our brokenness, negotiating difficult grievances and disputes with one another is holy work. When we name our hurts or call another to account, Christ is present in that challenging, necessary work.

Oh, one more thing. This works both ways. If someone comes to you and tells you how you’ve harmed them…. And if they come a second time, now with a couple of others… Sit up and listen to them, so they don’t have to return with the entire congregation.

I wonder if you need to have an honest conversation with someone this week. Doing so could be a good step toward deeper love.

That light we see emanating from this point on the map, it is holy but it’s not magic; I am not even sure it’s goodness. The light is created as we work through our stuff together, through honesty, vulnerable as our beautifully imperfect selves. This is the way to the beloved community. Step by step. Day by day. Practice, practice, practice.

With the camera zoomed in close, this is personal, intimate; mediating relationships at home, church, our neighborhood. With the camera zoomed out, this is restorative justice – repairing, healing, making whole…. In or out, be ye *telios*. Gather and restore what is fractured; recover what is lost; return what has been taken; repent and repair; heal with truth, with love. “A divided world does not need a church free of conflict and sin but a church that models how conflict and sin can be transformed into [wholeness and] peace.” (Jeremy Troxler)

I commend a prayer to you for this week: the verses we have today from Psalm 119.

Let us pray.

“Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes… Make me go in the path of your commandments, for that is my desire.” We cannot make it out here alone. “Incline our hearts to your decrees… In your righteousness preserve our lives.” Amen.