

Proper 18 A

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*You Can't be a Christian by Yourself*

A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did moved toward solving the impasse. Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 99-year-old founder. He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles. "So, tell me," he pleaded, "was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?" "No," answered the old rabbi. "Ah," responded the younger man, "then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?" "No," answered the old rabbi. "Well," the young rabbi responded, "what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream." "Ah," said the old man, "that was the tradition."

This story could have easily been about a Christian community as a Jewish one. For there is no religious community, that is not without conflict. The church is a funny thing. It is both a spiritual community and a very human institution. It is of God, created to continue God's work in the world. It is, as Paul, calls it, the "body of Christ," embodying Christ's life and mission in the world now. But the church is also of humanity- men and women just trying to get along and work together for the purpose of the institution. It is very much like a human body, sometimes all of its parts are working really well together while at other times there's nothing but aches and pains! The challenging and wonderful thing about the church, and for that matter for any kind of community, is that it is made up of real people, people who are at times selfish and difficult.

It is into this reality that Jesus speaks, according to Matthew, about the issue of conflict that can arise in the community. Jesus does not smooth over or deny

problems within the church; but with a refreshing candor addresses them head on. In his effort to give practical solutions on how to deal with conflict, Jesus reminds us that community, not the romantic, idealized version, but the authentic kind is in fact hard to come by. Engaging one another around the difficult challenges of living in community means that we have to work continually on loving and being loved.

In her reflection on the work of loving, Enuma Okoro writes, "I guess I consider that the work of loving and being loved can at times feel like a wrestling match. The idea of loving someone or being loved by someone is easy to sentimentalize. But anyone's who's ever been in a deeply mutual, loving relationship, platonic or romantic, knows that love is often more challenging than effortless. It often requires the willingness to push through and tackle head on the intricacies of embracing another person in the fullness of their story and complexity...The work of loving is tiring, risky and dangerous. It can seem to require super-human strength and calls us to persist even when we would rather give up. But no one walks away from a loving relationship without being transformed in some way that marks us as having encountered God."

Striving to be in an authentic community means that we must be willing to get to know each other and not in some superficial kind of way; but in a way which inevitably involves struggle, discomfort and conflict. It's work, hard work which requires intentionality, honesty and the openness to claim our own shortcomings as well as the desire to forgive others for theirs.

In her memoir *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles' encountered God through the community of St. Gregory's and then in turn created a community for folks who had nowhere to belong by opening a food pantry at the same altar where she was first transformed. Miles' words about church are as refreshingly candid as Jesus' and they speak openly to the struggle and to the beauty of creating such a community. Towards the end of her memoir, she reflects on this endeavor. "You can't be a Christian by yourself," she writes. "You can't be more special or holy. I was going to be changed, too, and lose my private church for a new one I

couldn't control. I was going to have to work with the people I liked at St. Gregory's, and the ones who irritated the hell out of me, and a bunch of strangers I hadn't even met yet. 'In plain words,' as the archbishop said, 'unity is a gospel imperative to just the extent that we find it hard.'"

In our world of pandemics and protests and polarization we all are hungering for real community, the kind where it is safe to share our stories, the kind where we are committed to the hard work of knowing and loving one another, warts and all, and the kind which creates deep connections amid the necessary conflict and struggle of engaging in this work.

As the church, we sometimes get so preoccupied with budgets and buildings and programs that we can easily lose sight of what is at the heart of our identity- to create an authentic community which people are hungering for and which they are finding more accessible in places beyond these walls. I believe that in this time of such societal upheaval and suffering we, the church, have something to offer that Facebook and Twitter and all sorts of other kinds of communities can't offer. For where two or three are gathered together in Jesus' name, he is with them. Where we find a place of connection and belonging amid conflict, where we give ourselves to knowing one another and loving one another: that is not only astonishing, it is life changing. For, no one walks away from a community, committed to the work of love, without first being transformed in some way that marks them as having encountered God. *Amen.*