

Sermon – Proper 18 – St Mary's Lake Ronkonkoma

Matthew 18:15-20 and Romans 13:8-14

Baptism of Wesley Thomas Chaves

Our country is presently facing significant challenges caused by both nature's heavy hand and the heavy hand of government. Several major hurricanes are changing the landscape of the country in the south and south-east, causing destruction to our cities and towns and displacing tens of thousands of people. Wild fires in the west are threatening to do the same thing there. Politically, immigration continues to be a challenge for many people, with the government's recent actions changing the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, making them insecure in a country they have called home for many years.

When we are threatened with so much uncertainty and destruction of lives and property we often hear stories of people's generosity and goodwill. In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey neighbors pitched in with their boats and bodies to rescue many, many people from flooded homes. Strangers setup food and clothing distribution almost overnight. Neighbor supported neighbor. That generosity changes people's lives for the better.

Challenging times tend to bring out the best in most people. Our individualistic tendencies give way to communitarianism and the belief that we are all in this together.

The development of western liberal democracies was heavily influenced by the period known as the enlightenment which occurred in the 18th century, often referred to as the Century of Philosophy. John Locke, an English philosopher, was a key player and his treatise on Civil Government shaped the thinking of the founding fathers of this country. He advocated the separation of church and state and emphasized the individual rights of people to be life, liberty, health and property. He specifically excluded religious concerns.

The culture that we experience today has been shaped by Locke's philosophical understandings which means a culture centered on individual rights with an emphasis on independence, self-reliance and individual authority. The church is not immune from feeling the full effects of this culture each and every day. The church is a gathering of people and people can see and experience church as a group of self-sufficient individuals who come together once a week then do their own thing for the remainder of the time.

The church as we understand it though is a community of the New Covenant and as such looks to Jesus for guidance for how we should relate as people in community. The apostle Paul saw the church as opposite to a group of self-sufficient individuals. He saw it as a body of believers with Jesus as the head, and as a place of mutual interdependence. Each one of its members is incomplete without the others, where the suffering of one is the suffering of all.

When we come into a relationship with Jesus Christ we come to understand that Jesus calls us to new life, a life that is not shaped by the culture of the world but by the living God. Jesus brought together the twelve apostles to be the first community of the new covenant. The church as the new body of Christ continues this tradition today.

The church is not the building but is the people that gather in Jesus name. The body of Christ is the people that come together in mutual interdependence to worship God, give thanks and to share in the Holy Eucharist as a sign of our interdependence with God. As Christians, we bind ourselves to one another and to God in mutual recognition and support. We risk relationships with people outside of our own gender, nationality, language, ethnicity or socio-economic status. We seek as Christians to overcome difference and it is this characteristic that differentiates Christians from the rest of the world, which organizes around sameness.

Overcoming difference is not always easy. We form tribes more easily and find safety and security in sameness. That is why I said we risk relationships with people outside of our own tribe. To risk a relationship with someone different from you means that you see the other person as a neighbor, as a full creation of God in the same way we are all creations of God. Jesus defines a neighbor as any human being with whom we interact.

Our reading from Paul's letter to his friends in Rome reveals his thoughts on what it means to love one's neighbor. Paul sees love not as an emotion but as behavior. We love someone by how we treat them, not by "greeting card aphorisms." Love as a behavior shapes our lives as Christians and builds communities. Love requires of us to constantly reflect on our interactions and intentions for relating to others in community. When we love fully there is no need to police what we do because our action does no wrong to a neighbor. The Law is fulfilled.

Paul reminds us that the commandments God handed to Moses help us define our relationships with God and each other in community. In the reading this morning Paul reminds his friends that most of the commandments are relational guides for our family and community living and that the 'new commandment' that Jesus offers, that is to love your neighbor as yourself, is a summation of these ancient laws. To love God and to love neighbor defines our relationship to both and our act of love becomes inseparable one from the other because God is the ultimate neighbor for us all.

Today is a great celebration because we welcome [Wesley as] a new member of the church of God. Through Wesley's baptism he will become a part of the community of faith that strives to love God and neighbor, to put aside difference and to become bound together in mutual interdependence. [Wesley's parents Elaina and Jennifer and his godparents Jeanmarie and Walter stand with him today and agree to raise him as a Christian, and to teach him about Jesus and about love for a neighbor.]

None of us know how [Wesley's] his life will evolve, what challenges await him, what blessings he will receive, or who he will become. We all have hope for him that he will grow to live a full and blessed life and share those blessings with his family and his community. As [his parents,

god-parents and] the body of Christ we agree to help him become his truest self, the person God created him to be. If [Wesley] he is accepted, loved, raised in the knowledge of Jesus and the faith then he will have the best chance to fully embrace his life. If he is denied love, rejected or shamed for who he is, or silenced by opposing voices then he could feel far from the love of God, empty and isolated. We all would have failed him.

[If we all are to honor Wesley's full personhood we will need to connect with his spirit, and the inner person that he is. And we do this by listening to him, listening to his sacred stories and experiences, and guiding him when he needs support and encouragement. We will love him for who he is, a creation of God and welcome him always into our faith community.]

Jesus stands at the center of our faith continually calling us toward a deeper relationship with him, and a deeper relationship with each other, with our neighbors. Jesus yearns to have us close, to be welcomed, to be seen and to be understood. Jesus calls us to be healed and to be in healthy relation. Jesus also calls us to be open to see, and to hear and to speak the love that Jesus models for us when he welcomes each one of us as his neighbor.

[Jesus calls us to welcome Wesley always. Wesley, we pray for you and ask God to be gracious to you and open your eyes so that you may see Jesus in all people of the world, open your ears that you may hear Jesus' voice, and open your heart and your mouth so that you may speak of your experiences of Jesus working in your life, and in the lives of those around you.]

We should continue to pray for each other and this community of faith that we may continue to welcome each other and those that come into our midst, either here at the St Mary's or in our own communities. We should continue to pray that we will not be afraid to get to know them and to see them for who they are inwardly and spiritually. Our world is full of rejected and isolated people so we need to work together to help our neighbors seek a relationship with God as an antidote to the worldly culture of individualism.

Let us always stand willing to love our neighbor as they are and allow the power of our love and welcome transform their lives, for this is how the spirit of God works in the church, and in the world.

Amen