

“Connecting in Community”

September 6, 2026

Matthew 18: 15-20

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you’ve won over your brother or sister. But if they won’t listen, take with you one or two others so that *every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses*. But if they still won’t pay attention, report it to the church. If they won’t pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector. I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven. Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.”

Romans 13: 8-14

Don’t be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. The commandments, *Don’t commit adultery, don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t desire what others have*, and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: *You must love your neighbor as yourself*. Love doesn’t do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.

As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep. Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith. The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let’s get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light. Let’s behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don’t plan to indulge your selfish desires.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. Thanks be to God.

Meditation

An old story goes that a church hired a new pastor; and on his first Sunday, he preached the best sermon they had ever heard. It was inspiring, it was challenging. The people were wowed and so excited. The next week they came to church so excited to hear what he had to say this week. A couple minutes in they realized it sounded familiar – it was the same sermon from the week before. They were confused; but, maybe with all the chaos of starting a new call, he just didn’t have time to write a new one.

The following week again, he preached the same sermon; and the confusion turned to concern. When the fourth Sunday went by and it was the same sermon again, the elders got together and decided to talk to the pastor. He welcomed them into his office and asked what he could do for them. They answered, “We are a bit concerned that you keep preaching the same sermon every Sunday. Our question is: Do you have another sermon?” He smiled and responded, “I do have another sermon. I’ll preach it when you start truly listening to this one.”

I have some qualms with this story, but it does highlight the feeling many of my colleagues and I have that we preach the same couple of themes over and over and over. Some people say that a pastor really only has three

sermons. The Scriptures may change, the words might be different; but in essence, each preacher has only three main messages or themes that they deliver again and again. The longer I'm in the pulpit, the more I believe it. This got me thinking about my three themes, here's what I've identified:

- Justice – taking care of those who are on the margins, who are the target of unjust laws and policies
- Hope and comfort – paying attention and trusting God when things are difficult
- Aspects of life in community – we are made for each other, but it can get messy and uncomfortable

Today, I'm focusing once again on this final one – connecting in community. In both of our Scriptures today, Jesus and Paul give advice for living in community. In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus addresses what to do when there is conflict because of harm. And in the reading from Romans, Paul quotes Jesus, summing up the law saying, "Love your neighbor as yourself," which is itself directly pulled from the Old Testament. Love God and Love Neighbor is the essence of the whole story of faith, and how we do that is described in varying contexts with different Scriptures.

Essentially, the message has been the same since the formation of God's people in Genesis and Exodus and is as simple as "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." The simplest, most condensed version of Good News. It sounds so easy. Unfortunately, because we are human, it's a lot harder in practice, which is why we are still preaching the same sermon millennia after millennia.

And yet, in spite of the ancient nature of the message, Paul lends it a certain urgency. He says, "You know what time it is. The hour has come for you to wake up from your sleep." It is easy to get bogged down with the daily realities of living. Once again, I have to do laundry; I have to answer emails; I have to somehow feed myself day after day after day. We can ignore the important things because we are so focused on doing, doing, doing, keeping up with the pace of our modern lives. We get hasty in our pursuit of living.

But we can't forget that the most important thing, the thing you keep coming Sunday after Sunday to hear, is to love God and love neighbor. Love that is not a feeling, but an action. Love that changes the world. Love that repairs harm. Love that acknowledges the complexity of human existence and creates space for all people to flourish. Love that pushes back against evil. Love that tries to be selfless. Paul says, you know what time it is. Love urgently.

There's a song I love with a line that says, "I will love with urgency but not with haste." Haste makes a checklist for us to accomplish. It is something we do and then push past. When we try to address things too hastily, we often do more harm than good. But urgency helps us to see other people and ask what they need. It pushes us out of our comfort zone and asks us to meet people where they are. Paul asks us to love with urgency, but not with haste.

So, as we think about this ancient call to love, we ask some questions of ourselves: which of my neighbors urgently needs my love and attention today? Have I done harm in my haste, and with whom do I need to pursue repair?

We know what time it is. A time of dehumanization, disconnection, loneliness, greed. A time where so many people are hurting under the hasty actions of others. A time when we are being called to push back against

injustice for the sake of the communal good. So, knowing what time it is, let us love with urgency. That is our greatest calling as God's people.

I am going to close with a prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. May this familiar prayer guide us into the week:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is error, truth;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

It is in self-forgetting that we find;

And it is in dying to ourselves that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

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