

**Thirteenth after Pentecost**  
September 7, 2014  
Barrhaven United Church

[Psalm 149 (VU p.872, sung)]  
Romans 13: 8-14  
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Matthew 18: 15-20

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### **Neighbourliness**

Busy week - the first week after Labour Day. Back to school, end of holidays, the symbolic if not actual, end of summer. The first week after labour day is always busy, demanding, often difficult and tiring. We can easily feel stretched and stressed in our work and home life.

And the news doesn't help. Putin and the Ukraine, and the rest of the world, Syria, ISIS, Iraq, Gaza, Israel, not to mention Ebola continuing to spread its pall of death in West Africa - all this can make us even more worried and anxious about our world and about life. We feel the times are out of joint. Fortunately, this morning's scripture is about just these kinds of anxious stressful situations and how to respond to them.

The Matthew passage is revealing. Things are not ideal. The community is under threat. Kicked out of the synagogue, they have no home. They have serious differences of opinion and every dispute threatens to fracture their already fragile community. Jesus' procedure of conflict resolution is designed in to prevent resentment and hurt of unresolved slights from building up and preventing them from functioning as a community at all.

Try to resolve yourselves, then with a couple of others, and finally before the whole community. If there still is no resolution then the offender is to be treated as someone outside the community. And then Jesus utters the clincher. Where two or three are gathered there I am among them.

Now we think of this as reassuring. And so we should. I remember hearing it in the context of the praying community. That two praying together brings the presence of Christ into the room and the prayers become just that more efficacious. But in this context, the saying is also a warning. It is a warning that Christ is also a witness to the proceedings for resolving a disagreement, so make sure that's what you are doing and not gossiping or slandering or plotting to get your own way.

Paul's instructions are for a community expecting the end of the age to come at any moment. It's advice for living in immanent catastrophe.

Paul reminds the Romans - a community that was highly structured and stratified, very conscious of honour and who owed what to whom - that all of that doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is love. Love is what you owe, and do not owe anyone anything else but love.

In Christ's realm only love matters. Only living as a witness, as a window to the boundless loving nature of God matters. The Beatles sang, 50 years ago now, all you need is love. Paul adds, all you owe is love.

He reminds them of the rules of hospitality. Those ancient codes that set out what love looked like in a community and who it was owed to. He says that all the law - all Torah - the ten commandments and all the other regulations and instructions about how to live with each other are included in one rule: Love your neighbour as yourself.

In the ancient world the rule of hospitality was the foundational rule of living. Treat the stranger as a neighbour. Stranger - that word that in all the languages of the ancient near east means both stranger and enemy. The most radical idea in the history of the world up to then was to offer hospitality to a stranger as if he was a friend. To treat a stranger, an enemy, as a member of the community was revolutionary.

Now Paul values that up even further. Now, he says, treat your neighbour as yourself. Distinctions between stranger and neighbour have been abolished. Distinctions between neighbour and family have been abolished. And now the distinction between neighbour and self are being abolished. And this, Paul says, is the foundation of our spiritual practice as followers of the way of peace of Jesus Christ. This is love.

Now why does this matter? Because in times of crisis you need to have practiced loving hospitality so when it's needed, when you're confronted with strangers, when you have little or nothing to be hospitable with, the attitude and habit of generosity and love will not desert you. Because it tends to, in times of crisis. Our best intentions tend to desert us in moments of fear, stress, uncertainty and danger.

That is why we practice the spiritual disciplines of hospitality and love. It helps to keep panic at bay when times are tough. When we are stressed and stretched beyond what we think we can bear, that is when the habit of loving the stranger, the neighbour, as ourselves takes over. It's a habit we cultivate in order to counteract the very worst tendencies of human nature.

As Christians, our labour in the world is to do all our work with love, without distinction, with everyone. We practice this discipline, this spiritual practice not only to create well-being in ordinary times, but in order to prepare ourselves for extraordinary times, so our habit of loving does not desert us when we disagree with each other,

when the other ceases to be neighbour, when the neighbour becomes stranger, enemy. We cultivate the habit of love to prepare ourselves for the tough times that we know we must face, the tough times that must be faced in every life.

We need both Matthew's and Paul's advice to live as Christians in the world today. We need both kinds of instruction if we are to be a witness to the boundless love and grace of God no matter what life throws at us.

Pray for the suffering in the world and remember love.

Amen.

c 2014, Suzanne E. Sykes