

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Matthew 18:15-20  
Preacher: Vicar, Jim Goodyear

St. Peter's Lafayette Hill, PA  
September 7, 2008

### **“Listening Hearts of Love”**

Raising children is a daunting responsibility. When my oldest son Bradley was born, I found myself asking, “Can I do this God?” How am I to do go about this task? You know God, I struggle to live myself, now you want me to help someone else in this world. Where is the book that tells me how to raise a child? What do I need to do next? As a new parent, I felt unprepared for this role. Here I was, a young father charged with the responsibility of raising a child in this world. Even though I understood I would not be the only person to influence Bradley's life, I am his father after all, and a father is to love and care for his children. His mother and I were given this gift of life to love and cherish for the rest of our lives. No matter what was to happen, we were responsible for the raising of this child. There would be times of joy and sadness, times of loving and times of despair; all in the course of life.

In the course of raising children, there may come a time when a parent must offer some ‘tough love’; times when a parent must ‘tell them like it is’, ‘brutally honest’. You know that what you are about to tell your child is going to cause you some discomfort, but in the long run, the information passed along will be beneficial for the child. They may not hear you that way at first; but eventually, usually after teenage years, they appreciate your concern.

Brad and I have had some tough love conversations. I wanted to make him aware of possible consequences if he were to take an action in a particular direction. Although I can laugh about this now, ten years ago was a different story. Bradley had spent the weekend with me. On this particular Sunday evening, my family gathered for a picnic in my backyard. We had a great time. Brad and Bryan were playing games in the house with their cousins. At some point near the end of our time together, one of Brad's younger cousins let the cat out of the bag. “Uncle Jim, do you know Brad has his tongue pierced?” I probably looked shocked; I felt my jaw hit the floor. Needless to say, after everyone had gone, Brad and I had a heart to heart talk. This was not the first time Brad had gotten a piercing, without his mother or I knowing about it. For me it wasn't the issue of the piercing rather the way in which he went about it. First he had not talked to either one of us about it and secondly in our conversation I learned he had done this illegally. He was not 18 at the time, he had lied to the technician who was also

not licensed. I was more concerned because of health reasons and decision process. I tried as best I could to handle this with love and grace. He managed to hide the piercing from his mother two more days. Within twenty-four hours the tongue piercing was gone. I later found out that he had managed to hide this from both of us for six weeks!

I had to confront Brad, not because of a piercing, but because I loved him and cared for him. I was concerned that he might have endangered himself, fortunately he didn't. Helping others, and especially those we love, can sometimes be difficult. We love and care about our family and close friends because we don't want to see them hurt. Matthew writes, "If another member of the church, some translation use 'brother', sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone" Jesus is telling us to confront a conflict head on. Depending on the situation, that can be tough. There are so many things that surface. How can I tell this person they have done me wrong? Can I be sure they will listen to me? What if the other person lashes back in words or with physical force? Can I genuinely express my love without being too emotional? These are all questions that might stop us from facing a conflict.

Conflict is a part of the human condition. Whether in a family situation, a work situation or even a congregation, conflict happens. There is no way to avoid it. Whether you call it sin or conflict, someone is going to be uncomfortable. Whether it is done intentionally or unintentionally, someone suffers. When a situation arises, we are quick to point fingers, blaming someone else. Sometimes when we try to address the situation, we get in more trouble. Other times the finger pointing is nothing more than a power struggle; trying to gain an upper hand over the situation. Jesus tells us if you are unable to bring the offender back, or reconciled then take two or three others with you to face the offender to have an impartial ear on the matter and if still no reconciliation, tell the church, and if the offender still does not listen, let such a one be to you as a Gentile or tax collector. That seems like a harsh sentence. But then, Jesus says if two of you agree about anything you ask, it will be done by my father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among you. Gathered in my name; two or three, yes even when two or three gather to reconcile with God and each other, Jesus is there.

What troubles me most about this text is the manner in which we face those difficult situations in life where someone has offended us or when someone gives us a 'reality check'. I wonder if when we face someone with a difficult situation, are we aware of God's presence among us? How do we treat someone who has

done wrong? Do we try to bring them back to Jesus or do we treat them as a Gentile or tax collector or outsider?

Paul writes, “owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. Love your neighbor as yourself.”; even when that neighbor has done wrong. Christian lifestyle is grounded in this principle of loving our neighbor. When we truly love our neighbors as ourselves, we join self-affirmation with the affirmation of others. The experience of spiritual peace, a peace that comes from God, is one of ethical inclusion; of including those around us who are different. We experience God’s peace, when we identify our own good with the well-being of others. When they suffer, we suffer; when they rejoice, we rejoice. Extending God’s peace is not about us, rather an acknowledgment to the other person that God is with you. No matter what might be going on in your life, know that God is with you.

Where is the love, especially when we are faced with difficulties? Maybe you remember the song of the same title from the 70’s. When I checked the internet for the lyrics of the Roberta Flack tune, I found another song with the same title. This contemporary version was released in 2005 by the group Black Eyed Peas. I never heard of this group, so I read their lyrics. These lyrics speak of a modern conflict in the world. It speaks of racism, war, discrimination, negativity, selfishness, the influence of the culture, etc. The refrain is a plea for help “People killin’, people dyin’ Children hurt and you hear them cryin; Can you practice what you preach and would you turn the other cheek. Father, Father, Father help us; Send some guidance from above; ‘Cause people got me, got me questionin’ where is the love, where is the love, where is the love, where is the love...”

Father, Father send some guidance from above. He did, His own Son, Jesus. Knowing Jesus and bringing others to Jesus is our calling as baptized Christians; to reconcile one another with God through the love of Jesus Christ. It is our responsibility to bring others, those who do us wrong, those who do without the necessities of living, those in trouble with the law, even each other to a better understanding of what it means to have a relationship with Jesus. It is in reconciliation, helping someone else in a difficult situation that is where the true sign of Christ is present. When we confront those who have strayed in whatever way -- spoken ill of us or someone else, physically hurt someone, gotten a piercing illegally or without permission – Christian love permeates the encounter. It is not our responsibility to judge the other person, but to bring the other person to a point of reconciliation with us, but more importantly with God through Jesus Christ.

We gather for worship together each week to remind ourselves that the center of our life and the life of the world is not war, or death, or famine, or discrimination, or racism but Jesus Christ and the love of God. Did you know worship is the only time Christians gather together to celebrate God's love as a community? A time to come together to be refreshed in God's love with each other, a time to celebrate at the table with the gifts God has given us in the body and blood of His Son, to welcome each other in the name of Jesus with God's peace. Worship gathers us into one body to enrich and grow faith within us individually and corporately. It is in community we are refreshed for a new day to bring others to Jesus.

Like a parent raising a child with love, God raises us to new life in Jesus Christ. Paul reminds us, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ" in all you do. Put on a new way of life that reflects the light of Jesus Christ. In the gospel of John, he says, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." At baptism the newest member in the body of Christ is given a lighted candle, 'let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.' In all you do, keep Jesus at the center. Through the power of God's reconciling love, we are putting on a new way of life. Go out into the darkness of the world, and shine reconcile those you encounter to the joy, life, and love of Jesus Christ. Amen.