

Isolation or Reconciliation?

As I have talked with people over the last few months, one feeling that emerges again and again is a sense of isolation. It is especially acute in those who live alone, but I also hear it from couples and even families with children. In Iowa there was never a stay-at-home order issued by the governor, but many people self-quarantined anyway. It was just not worth taking a chance of catching the coronavirus.

What people have missed most through isolation is normal human contact with other people. Even those who go out encounter masked faces. Masks protect everyone, but they also prevent seeing all of the emotions projected by the human face. We have to *tell* people that we're smiling. And then there are all the Zoom meetings. Personally, I am exhausted by Zoom meetings. A lot of human communication takes place nonverbally. During Zoom meetings I spend an enormous amount of energy trying to read faces that are looking away from the camera and piecing together words garbled by a poor connection. This is not how human communication is supposed to work.

Within this pandemic context, the Gospel reading for today can sound peculiar. It's all about face-to-face meetings. It assumes that the church community gathers on a regular basis in a normal way. It talks about reconciling differences when in fact many of us are trying to figure out how we're going to get through this week without getting sick or going stir crazy.

It also assumes a kind of church culture one rarely finds these days. Most places are doing whatever they can to keep the people they have, not finding ways to cast people out. It sounds odd in our ears that if a member refuses to listen to the church, they should be treated like an outcast, a Gentile or tax collector.

I think that misses the point, though. This passage isn't about isolating someone; it's about reconciliation. The whole focus is on bringing an errant church member back into the fold. Jesus says that if someone has done something against you, talk to that person directly. Don't bad-mouth them to your friends. Don't talk behind their back. Talk to them directly. If the two of you can't resolve your differences, take along one or two others. If that doesn't work, try to get the person to listen to the church. Only after every effort at reconciliation fails should you accept that no change will take place.

The focus on reconciliation is so strong here because that's really the mission of the church. As our prayer book catechism says, the mission of the Church is "To restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." Christ is the key. Without the love of Jesus, reconciliation is very difficult. And during times when we struggle, it can be hard to access that love of Christ within us. We are just too focused on ourselves.

Paul picks up on that idea in his letter to the church in Rome. He almost sounds like John the Evangelist, who was fond of repeating "Love one another." In John's Gospel that's the new commandment Jesus gave to his disciples, a passage we hear every Maundy Thursday. Here's Paul saying the same thing in his own way, that loving one another is the fulfillment of the law. Paul also focuses on the necessity of Christ for doing so. I love his image of putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, as though Christ is the armor of light that defends against the powers of darkness. It may be where Martin Luther got his idea that when we put on Christ, God sees the righteousness of Christ when he looks at us rather than our own sins. I rather like that!

Given this focus on reconciliation and the love of Christ in today's readings, I have a suggestion for you to try in the week to come. Is there someone who needs your reconciliation? Someone you have hurt or wronged, or simply someone you have not spoken to for a while? What about reaching out to them? I have to learn again and again that the best antidote for isolation is talking to someone else. In listening to another person I can get away from my own worries.

Next week the focus on reconciliation continues when Peter asks Jesus how many times one should forgive, suggesting a generous seven times. No, Jesus will say, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. In other words, don't keep count. Jesus then throws in a parable for good measure. You'll have to tune in next week to find out what it is. For now, start the process of reconciliation. Make that contact – today, when you're thinking of it. I can guarantee you that it will make you less isolated.

[Pentecost 14: Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20.]