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Exodus 12: 1 – 4      Psalm 149  
Romans 13: 8 – 14      Matthew 18: 15 – 20

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“We do it all for you!” “Because I’m worth it.” It’s all about us at the center of everything. Or so current fashion, automobile and many other commercial campaigns would have us believe. But the truth in our lives is that it is never really about any one of us as the center of the universe. Sorry. The closest we ever come is if we are infants and toddlers in a loving family, and the whole world – as we know it, at least – revolves around our needs, our wants, our schedule. And then comes a rude awakening around the age of two.

We suddenly become aware that we are not queen or king of all we survey. The world does not always respond to our needs, let alone our desires and demands. We discover that there are actually other people, apart from ourselves, with needs, desires, schedules and demands of their own. We also learn that *we* don’t always have to meet *other* peoples’ demands, so we begin the “No, no, no,” or “Mine, mine, mine,” of the terrible twos. Early in life, we begin the process of individuation, defining who we are over and against all others. And yet, at the same time, we begin the process of living in community.

As part of communities – families, preschool or daycare, Sunday School, t-ball teams – we begin to be socialized. We are taught, either through experience or by being told, that in whatever group or groups of which we are a part, there are norms, ground rules, expectations for how we relate to one another.

A number of years ago, Robert Fulghum wrote a bestseller entitled, *Everything I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. The book contains simple observations, norms and truths such as:

- Always hold hands while crossing the street
- Take turns
- Wash your hands before you eat
- Share
- Say you’re sorry when you hurt someone...

...and the list goes on. If we all lived by these childlike ground rules, filled with wonder and trust, the world would be a gentler, kinder, more beautiful place to live. But heaven knows, even as children we have trouble sticking to these guidelines. And it only seems to get harder and more complicated as we grow into adulthood.

Those very issues of living in community, establishing norms and ground rules, and acknowledging and confronting wrongdoing in ourselves, our communities and our world are what today’s lessons address. God’s address to Moses, Paul’s letter to the Romans, and Matthew’s Gospel all speak to us about grace in community – the grace of God’s love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

We all travel in many different, yet intersecting, circles of relationships in our lives. As Christians, we travel in one very special circle – the Body of Christ, the Church. We, too, have spoken and unspoken norms, expectations and ground rules when it comes to being a member of this community. Norms, such as tithing and active, regular participation in the life of the community. Expectations, such as taking responsibility for our worship and our spiritual growth. Ground rules: love one another as Christ first loves us.

But how do we live among one another as people of God – trying to love God, neighbor and self – and yet recognize the seeming inevitability of conflict, wrongdoing and evil? How do we establish clear norms and ground rules, about what is acceptable and what is not in a God-centered community? What do we do when we act like the human beings with the gift of free will that we are and we choose wrongly?

The short answer is that we remember that we live by grace in a community of grace. But we also must remember that we are called to confront wrongdoing and evil in ourselves, our community and our world. Today's lessons, especially Matthew, make it clear that this is not an easy – or popularity contest winning – task. Sometimes, attempting to be an instrument of God can put us between a rock and a hard place. But there is only one right response: to call things as best we can discern that God sees them, and not how we see them through our own biases and woundedness. To make ourselves truly open to being instruments of God is to recognize that there are costly benefits to conforming to the grace of God's word. To be an instrument of God is to risk our reputation and our relationships; it is to be stretched out of our comfort zones; it is to be emptied of self.

Paul's words to the early church in Rome (and to us) give wise counsel, but create a juxtaposition of simplicity and complexity. Like Robert Fulghum's pithy observations, Paul's admonitions are straightforward and he summarizes them for us: 1) Love your neighbor as yourself; and 2) Love does no wrong. And yet it is obvious through his listing of hurtful things that Paul understands full well the depth of the human heart, and the difficulty of trying to live into such seemingly simple ground rules. Paul recognizes that in and of our own selves, we can't do it. We have to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ."

"If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel sound pretty harsh here. But there are a few things to consider.

The fact that Matthew has Jesus saying, "If another member of the church sins against you, ..." is something of a clue that maybe there is more Matthew in this passage than there is Jesus. Remember that Matthew is writing perhaps 40 to 50 years after Jesus' death. There is not a 'church' until after Jesus' death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So for Jesus to speak of an organized church in the present tense is either terribly prescient or, perhaps, Matthew placing on Jesus' lips the message that Matthew wishes to convey to the church he is addressing.

Whatever the case, Matthew, who is writing to a Christian audience of Jewish origins, offers a way to deal with the problem of settling community disputes. Matthew patterns the conflict resolution after procedures already in place in the Jewish synagogues. Underlying the solution is an honest expectation of good will between the offended and the offender. The model Matthew presents is for the aggrieved person to take the initiative and approach the offender in private to talk things out. If we are the ones who have been hurt, then we are the ones responsible for seeking reconciliation, rather than letting the hurt gnaw on us and destroy us. We are not to wallow in self-pity and victimization. And, the other party may not even realize that they have offended.

If privately speaking with the offender doesn't work, then we are to go back and, this time, take a few more members of the community along so that the perspectives of both parties are faithfully witnessed. And if that fails, well then, the heck with subtlety and discretion, Matthew says, take it before the whole community. [Keep in mind that Matthew presupposes a fairly small community, who

are pure in motive and objective in judgment, and that may not always be the case.] If there is STILL no reconciliation, well, by gum, treat the offending party as an anathema – “let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector,” Matthew has Jesus saying. I wonder if Matthew, formerly known as Levi, the tax collector, is smiling wryly (or perhaps even chuckling) as he writes these words.

Does Jesus really mean that as harshly as it sounds? It is very hard to think that Jesus, who goes about healing Israelites and Gentiles alike, who understands - thanks to the Canaanite woman – that his mission is to more than to just the house of Israel, who several times is recorded as sharing meals with tax collectors and who has called one of them to be part of the twelve, would say this in the context of shunning them and not having anything to do with them. What if, when Jesus says (presuming he did), “Let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector,” what if Jesus meant exactly the way *he* treated them?

In ministering to ‘outsiders,’ Jesus always operates out of a basis of love, compassion and a seeking of relationship between God and other. While Jesus confronts people, sometimes publicly, sometimes privately, Jesus never seeks to humiliate them. Jesus continually seeks those who are lost or who have strayed by bringing them to an awareness of their sin, their broken relationships. Then Jesus provides an opportunity for turning back to God.

Today’s lessons are not about drawing harsh lines and throwing people out if it just doesn’t work out. Rather, the lessons are about inclusion, reconciliation and being conduits of God’s boundless love. God recognizes our free will and the potential that provides for conflict among us. God also recognizes our need for guidance, sometimes mediation, and always love. Hence our call to embody God’s grace and to be God’s instruments in this world by confronting conflict, wrongdoing and evil. In doing so, we will sometimes feel some of God’s pain in loving creatures that have the power of free will. In doing so we will be prophetic. And in doing so, we will also be engaged in radical caring. What better image could there be for the Body of Christ on earth? +