

Sermon - Proper 18, Year A
Emmanuel - God With Us
9/10/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the Gospel of St. Matthew, one of the key ideas present throughout, from beginning to end, is the assurance that in Jesus Christ, God is *with* us. It is Matthew's Gospel where we find in chapter one that when Jesus is born, he is to be called "Emmanuel" – a word that literally means "God with us." This is chapter one. In the final chapter of the Gospel, in the very last verse, Jesus says, "remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." And so from the very beginning of the story – from "Emmanuel" – on through the rest of the action, we find Jesus revealing to the disciples and to the world what his presence looks like, who his presence is for, and what his presence means. In parables, in the calling of the disciples, in the giving of his own flesh in the Eucharist, in the way that he teaches and mends and proclaims, Jesus welcomes all of us into the magnificence of this extraordinary *with-ness*. His presence looks like the love of God. It is for everyone. And it means that nothing, not the slightest, smallest thing, will be lost.

Our Gospel passage today meets us in chapter eighteen, which begins with the disciples asking, "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" By this point, Jesus has walked on water. He has healed the sick. He has miraculously fed thousands of people on hillsides. He has shared parables of mustard seeds and vineyards. By chapter eighteen, the disciples are on board with believing that Jesus is who he says he is: the Messiah, the Anointed One of God. Yes, this is the one. And what an expected human impulse, then, to hope that by their companionship with the greatest one known to heaven, they might partake in some of this greatness too. But when they ask him about who will occupy these places of power, Jesus immediately turns to a little child. "Truly I tell you," he says, "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

He continues with what has become a famous passage in scripture: “if your eye causes you to sin, cut it out! For it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire.” These series of bold proclamations all point to the central idea that it is the little ones who must be protected. Even bodily harm is better than injuring someone who is vulnerable. None of these little ones will be forgotten. This is followed by the parable of the lost sheep, where Jesus compares himself to a shepherd who will leave the 99 sheep he tends safely on the hillside in order to find the one lamb who has wandered away.

And then to today’s lesson. Jesus is offering his hearers instruction on the substance of graceful Christian community. If someone has done something that offends you, do not gossip or complain, but approach the offender with discretion. If they do not listen, bring another. If they still do not listen, bring the rest of the community. And if they still obstinately refuse to amend their ways, then they shall be “as a gentile or tax collector.” This sounds like quite a condemnation, until we remember all of the previous chapters of the Gospel. Jesus has already embraced Gentiles. He has already eaten with tax collectors. And – delightfully - Jesus has called Matthew himself to be a disciple: a call that Matthew accepted from his tax collection booth.

Jesus is indeed giving instructions on how to be with one another in community. His words are echoed by St. Paul in today’s epistle as Paul continues his exhortation to the Romans about how they should grow in their love of neighbor together. When Paul tells them to “love one another,” he is speaking with the words of Jesus himself. But beneath these very good and very practical instructions, Jesus is up to something marvelous here. When you first read this chapter, there seems to be an abrupt transition from Jesus sharing the parable of the lost sheep to this list of more on-the-ground directives for community organization. But when we look closer, we see that they are two parts of the same story. These instructions are a continuation of the parable of the lost sheep.

When someone is at odds with the community, go and find them. Find them with gentleness and with discretion. If they still insist on wandering, send more people after them. If there is still trouble, send more people after that. And if still the person for whatever reason seems hellbent on flinging themselves over the hillside – like a Gentile! Or tax collector! – trust that Jesus himself will find them. He does not stop seeking the lost. He does not stop pursuing us. He loves us with the fervor of God himself, and there is no end to his efforts of cosmic search and rescue.

These instructions about correcting those among us who have strayed – and all of us are the one who strays at some point over the course of our lives – these instructions are not only a continuation of the parable of the lost sheep, but they are part of a much, much larger story. They are part of the whole story: a story where creation itself wandered away down the hillside. The prophets were sent to correct it with discretion. Then some additional prophets. Then the Son of God himself. And even still – even then, even now! – we human beings never seem to lose our partiality for the edge of the cliff.

But for Jesus Christ, nothing will be lost. Not one little one. Not one sinner. Not one lamb. For Jesus does not only seek us over the hillsides and cliffs of the earth, but he seeks us even unto death – his own death on the Cross. Even if we stand on a hillside across a chasm of sin or obstinance, there is no distance that cannot be bridged by his grace. The Cross stretches out across every impossible thing. It is the bridge between hatred and forgiveness. It is the flowered path that spans the distance between condemnation and mercy. It is the arms that reach down over the cliff and pull us back to solid ground. And whatever has ever threatened to separate us from the love of God is nothing in the radiance of his Resurrection.

This is “Emmanuel.” God with us, unto the end of the age.