

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 18:15-20

For the last several Sundays, our readings have given us examples of great faith and how it applies to our lives today. In the story of Jesus summoning Peter to walk on water, we learned that great faith involves stepping out of the boat. The story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman demonstrated the necessity of persistence in a life of faith. Last week we read what Jesus taught his followers about discipleship. Jesus calls his disciples to live in faith by denying themselves, taking up their crosses, and following him, even if they do so in a far from perfect way. The Gospel reading for today reveals to us another element of living faithfully by talking about the nature and nurture of relationships.

It should not surprise us that the God we worship is a God of relationships. God created us humans in His own image. Being created in God's image, allows us to be in relationship with Him. Even when our sinful nature caused us to break our relationship with God, He moved to restore that relationship. As the Gospel of John proclaims, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whosoever believed in Him would not perish, but would have eternal life".

Our journey, as we walk with God, is imperfect. We are still sinful beings; in our hearts, we seek to be lord of our lives and rebel against God. Our sinfulness is evident by our sins against God in thought, word and deed, by what we do and what we

neglect to do. The Holy Spirit speaks to us through our conscience, through Scripture, or through the voice of a friend, to convict us of our sin, and encourages us to change our ways. We frequently confess our sins, either in the privacy of our home, or in our community of worship. We seek God's forgiveness, that is always freely given, and we seek the help of the power of the Holy Spirit to turn from our sin and walk with Jesus, rather than follow our own human desires through the wilderness of life.

God's purpose is to move in our lives and restore our relationship with Him, rather than being vengeful, or causing us harm. God created us for a relationship with Him and he realizes that we do not experience peace, or the abundant life, until we willingly enter into that relationship.

The Gospel reading for today invites us to mirror our relationship with God in our relationships with others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. However, as we all know, this is easier said than done.

When we are offended and hurt, it is our natural, human response to avenge ourselves against the one who offended us. We do this in a variety of ways, with gossip being the most destructive. A follower of St. Francis of Assisi had a problem with the sin of gossip. As punishment for his gossiping behavior, St. Francis had him lay a feather on the doorstep of every household in the town of Assisi. When the man returned to St. Francis and reported that he had accomplished his penance, St. Francis then directed him to go and pick up all of the feathers. The man objected, "I can't do that," he said, "the feathers have been blown all around town by the wind." St. Francis slowly nodded his head and said, "So it is with gossip, the words you say can never be picked up again."

As Christians, when we are offended and our relationship with another is strained, bruised or broken, our goal is to heal, restore, and renew that relationship, not to hurt the offender, not to insist on our own way, and not to get even. Relationships are too important to suffer the attacks of bruised egos.

Our Christian response when we are offended is to communicate with the one who hurt us. We are not confront and tell him or her that he or she is wrong. Instead, we simply share, in a friendly manner, how we were hurt by what he or she said or did.

Forgiveness is to be given to an offender, even if the individual does not ask for our forgiveness or remains unrepentant. This is not only for the sake of the relationship, but also for our own physical, spiritual and emotional health. We live with the hope and prayer that the relationship will be restored, even if it takes some time for that to happen. We are challenged by Christ's example never to close the door on a relationship.

We sometimes downplay the importance of relationships. Our material possessions, prestige, career, and ego are sometimes considered more important. We sever relationships with people who don't do what we want them to do, or who don't believe as we do. Relationships, though, are one of the most important parts of our lives. We are social beings who were created for relationships with our creator and with our fellow human beings. Healthy relationships between brothers and sisters in Christ, are necessary for a loving witness to those around us. Many of us have experienced how the fighting and bickering of congregations have soured those outside the church on the Christian faith and caused the congregation's witness to be ineffective.

Strong, dynamic relationships are necessary for Christian service. We have to be able to work together if we are to do what

Christ calls us to do. Hard feelings, bruised egos, the unwillingness to forgive, all hinder our ability to meet the needs of others and share with them the Gospel of Jesus Christ through our deeds.

We are a people of faith who seek to live out our faith in our daily lives. Faithfulness to Jesus Christ is more than simply knowing the right things and believing certain truths. Faithful living is allowing our faith to motivate and influence our words and actions.

Faithfulness urges us to live in relationship with others as friends rather than enemies, because while we were enemies of God, Christ died for us, so that we might call God our Father and so that God might call us his sons and daughters.

AMEN.