

EXODUS 12:1-14

PSALM 149

ROMANS 13:8-14

MATTHEW 18:15-20

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty Third Sunday in Ordinary
Time

September 10, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Congregational Conversations!

“Come let us reason together says the Lord!” (Isaiah 1:18). Or, as the New Revised Standard Version states it, “Let us argue it out!” Well, evidently there was not a whole lot of reasoning but a whole lot of arguing of the worst kind going on in the unnamed church that got Matthew’s undivided if but brief attention. So much so that the Matthean writer puts a mini how-to manual into his version of Gospel, instructions directly spoken from Jesus’ lips to his readers’ ears, demanding civility, yes, civil and safe, appropriate, polite, and yes, neighborly, conduct when conversing with a congregational sibling, a brother or sister in the faith. Let’s act like human beings, shall we? Or perhaps better yet, let’s not act like human beings! After all, how is that working out for us these days? In the immortal words of someone, “Can’t we all just get along?” And the answer seems to be a resounding no, not even maybe! In all candor, it seems a bit odd to read about the Church according to Jesus, because this institution did not exist yet, a subtle reminder that the Gospels were the latest New Testament or Christian writings to be composed. Somewhere at the time of Matthew’s writing, somewhere in some church, there was obviously a squabble going down among the membership, perhaps a fight ensuing over the color of one of the bathrooms! Yes, churches

have split over paint colors, the need for an organ and what kind, and every imaginable decorative nightmare. I always enjoy my ride coming out of the north Georgia mountains when I pass the Antioch Baptist Church, Number One, a sign, pun intended, that there surely must be an Antioch Baptist Church, Number Two, probably not located too far away from the original, strategically placed close to ground zero. The joke I grew up with was that wherever two or more Baptists were gathered there would be one more church than people. But I digress; I often do!

Even a surface reading of the epistles reveals that the early Church, yes, in its many forms, its many expressions, was as fractured, as splintered, yes, as unique, as they all were. Coming out of what would be the permanent, ultimate, schism with their Jewish forebears in the faith as they were disfellowshipped, this sectarian Jesus movement unceremoniously kicked out of the Temple and the synagogues, breaking up was hard to do but became a routine way of life. In this painful drama the seed of discord, disagreement and disharmony, was permanently planted, germinated in a variety of skirmishes, Paul and Peter even coming face to face, not nearly on the same page about table fellowship, failing to come to any agreement about who could eat together, not even close, Peter still a stickler about circumcised versus uncircumcised. These skirmishes of major import causing a lasting dis-ease that is still flourishing, the fruits of these rotten seedlings creating a legacy that has haunted the Church for more than two thousand years. I always find it funny when I hear about a local church that claims to be a model, even a carbon copy, of the New Testament church because I always want to ask, "which one?" They were always diverse, different, yes, distinct, and that, of course, is a wonderful and a dreadful thing. No contemporary congregation, including our fine church, even remotely resembles a facsimile of these early manifestations and mutations of ecclesial substance, remembering that the early church lived communally with no

building, no bricks, no budget, and believed their communal existence was a temporary fix, that they were not long for this world as they awaited an escort of divine transportation. How did that work out? To this day, we do indeed live the controversial legacy cast by their huge shadow, yes, every time we get together for worship, fellowship, and mission. We are all knockoffs, spinoffs!

Throughout my career in my preaching ministry, I have had cause to approach this text as a teachable moment for congregations that were disagreeable in their disagreements. This lection offers a paradigm, a step-by-step process designed to solve problems, to mend relationships, to steady an ecclesial ship that might be listing in one or numerous directions, some of them surely the wrong ones. Dysfunctional churches, while they are agonizingly painful in so many ways, for clergy and for laity, provide numerous opportunities for the pulpiteer, a stash of readymade material admonishing the faithful toward better behavior. **So how do you preach a sermon about verbal etiquette when the congregation you serve gets along so swimmingly well, is so sincerely loving and caring of one another, is so compassionately empathetic and sympathetic when someone, anyone, is in crisis mode? You folks just do not give me any fodder, leaving any meat on the bone, nothing about which a sermonizer can complain and wax eloquent, no concern about the behavior of the body politic. This kind of harmony and peaceful unity has not always been my pastoral experience! What's a preacher to do? Got to preach anyway! Got to have a sermon! In fact, it is your gentle agape spirit, the love, the koinonia, the fellowship, in this sacred space, that got me to thinking as I pondered these words attributed to Jesus, put in his mouth not too awfully long after his death, considering the scheme of things, time as an ever-flowing river. This Gospel lection is a word desperately needed in our uncivil society, politically, socially, and yes, religiously. We no longer know how to talk with one another. No matter what side of any aisle, whether right or wrong, what we**

have is a major failure to communicate. We are rapidly approaching the boiling temperature, way past simmering, almost, if not already, reaching a point of no return, rumors of civil war anything but mere banter, idle chatter, lip service. No, it is a running joke that is not funny, taking up arms becoming more and more a real possibility, ugliness we have already experienced in isolated but very public ways. I even saw a new report about a local pastor in another state advocating for the possibility or probability for armed conflict, egging on his uncritically thinking flock, intellectual lightweights all, ugliness we have already experienced in these kinds of disturbingly frightening confrontations. We, yes, we clergy types, are supposed to be the leaders in the peacemaking movement, the examples, the models, not the instigators.

Part of the challenge, perhaps unlike ever before, is that for many of us a line has been drawn in the sand, creating and maintaining a hard boundary, yes, to use a biblical image, a plumb line, that we will not cross. The denominational tradition in which I was raised, or is it reared, no matter which theological stripe in what was a diverse setting was guidepost, believed in the strict separation of Church and State. Roger Williams, who was a Baptist before he was nothing, well, eventually becoming a seeker—aren't we all—established the Rhode Island Colony, banished from Massachusetts Bay, a society clinging to its proprietary, one-dimensional, authoritarian, Puritanical rule, becoming the very thing it despised and once longed to escape. Yes, early on, the Baptists were the liberals—go figure—and the Congregationalists were the witch burning fundamentalists! I guess we waved at one another as we passed each other, ships passing in the night, uh, darkness! The point with that long and winding detour is to acknowledge that many of us remain uncomfortable bringing politics into the pulpit and will not do so unless a theological threshold is breached. Fair game! The problem is that pulpit politics, political pulpits, are now acceptable, even legal, clergy free to cheerlead for

their candidate of choice, allowed, even encouraged, to advocate and endorse from the pulpit, churches endorsing on their signage, marquees dedicated to their dear fearless leaders, a shiny new play toy that many pastors and preachers and their lemming flock are joyfully embracing, no longer fearing that the IRS will come knocking on church doors, swooping into the mix to take away tax exemptions that have always been a guarantee to churches and denominations. We are living in a new day, and we have yet to catch up with ourselves and our new reality, yes, our new normal. We really have no idea where this out of control and “conductorless” train is headed. I am reminded of the verse in the Bible that reminds us that what we will be we do not yet know, has not yet been determined. And in this instance, that is a very scary thing!

Matthew breaks down his argument, puts forth his thesis, in as simple a way as is possible, the least common denominator no doubt being a breath of fresh air to whichever church it was that was spawning behavioral concerns and needed a good scolding, a serious rebuke, disagreements that had become disagreeable. If a brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them. I confess that if I had been the writer that I would have had Jesus suggest that the offended party go to go to them and share, tell them what is on your mind, transparent about what is bothering you. If they listen, you have gone a long way to solving what might seem to be irreconcilable differences. You will have preserved the bond of brother or sister, saving a fragile and even toxic sibling relationship and perhaps maintaining a modicum of sanity in the process. But if they will not listen, take it to the church, in other words, make it public, all bets off. The writer then says to treat them like a Gentile and a tax collector, the oddity of that being that Jesus embraced Gentiles and tax collectors. Sometimes, me thinks these scriptures do contradict themselves, and not in a good way. If Jesus had really said this, I think he would have invoked the seventy times seven rule and advocated that we never give up on a

brother or sister, that they are never beyond our grace and love, never beyond our reach. Okay, history has revealed more than a few nutjob evil dictators who seem almost unhuman, very inhumane, who for all intents and purposes were and are beyond our good graces. The lessons offered in this lection are so easy to understand, so simple, and yet they are a stumbling block on steroids, the difficulties seemingly too great to overcome. We have reached a point, a place at which we sense the need to emotionally, some even physically, run for cover, to build bunkers to protect ourselves, to circle the wagons of our tribe and clan to insulate and isolate ourselves from those we believe could truly do us harm. Yes, we are in survival mode, a very human response, instinct taking control, and might as well admit to it. What else can we or could we do? We need our shields, our protective bubbles, safe sanctuaries that guarantee us at least a modicum of safety and security. And think about it, other than sports, an isolated outlier, all of us, politically, socially, and religiously, are so different in so many ways. Yes, birds of a feather flock together and that is fine, most acceptable, until we can no longer recognize that we are all fowl, and on occasion foul, that we cannot perceive, are lacking the capacity to embrace, the other as our neighbors, yes, our siblings, our brothers and sisters. The irony is that we all call ourselves Christians, though many of us now struggle with a word that seems to have been taken hostage, hijacked by the sectarian few or majority who traffic in guilt, judgment, and even hate, hard to tell which they are, “they” being the dangerous but necessary word. All things considered, when we break down the DNA of our faith we suddenly realize that we are nothing alike, that we have very little in common, that our perceptions about the faith, including the nature of the person of Jesus and the Christ of faith, are radically different, polarities focusing on opposing opinions, beliefs including certain practices that are contrary to one another. As Luther once said, describing every circumstance and situation we can imagine in this life, “Here I stand! I can do no other!”

And so, we are faced with either constant retreat or diving headfirst into the fray, spitting into the wind! Do we dare cross some lines and engage, all the while seeking to hold to our integrity, our authentic, genuine, selves, but allowing enough vulnerability to seek common ground? How do you compromise without compromising? It is a high wire act if it is at all possible, a teetering tension that exposes perceived adversaries on all sides to ridicule and perhaps worse. Have you seen the replays of the behavior by some zealots at some of the school board meetings around the country? Who in their right mind would sign up for such abuse? Who would want to be civic minded? Think of those two African American election workers in Georgia, women, by the way, who were just doing their job, fulfilling an oath, their sworn duty, committed to the great society. And, insert sidebar here, book bans are as bad and are the same as book burnings! We must find a way out of the maize that threatens to lose us all, the weeds getting higher by the day, the potential malaise of throwing up our hands in defeat very much a possibility, so many so weary from the endless onslaught of debate and derision. Sadly, at this point on what seems like an endless journey but probably will have a tipping point, is that none of us, no matter our positions, are winning. We are all losers in what appears an endless fight, a hopeless battle for the soul of our politics, society, and religious aspirations. **Only our discourse, our capacity, our human being and doing, has the slightest ability to solve our problems, to bring peace in our time to our tormented land and all around a troubled world, a global conflagration, battle royales abounding, wars more than rumor. We are more than capable, as the Bible says, more than conquerors!** Our elections, though determining, deciding, candidates for office are obviously not the solution—please do vote—nothing but temporary fixes kicking the can down the road until the next electoral cycle, impeachment now understood to be a way of dismissing adversaries publicly and permanently. Wow, how innovative! It is an endless gerbil wheel! **Cooler heads, calmer passions, rational debate and dialogue, olive branches extended,**

bridges built, must somehow get into the mix, especially by those who claim the faith of our forefathers and foremothers who know what Jesus would do, yes, in our hearts and minds. If it ain't loving, it ain't Jesus!

“Come, let us reason together,” the ancient prophet indeed prophesied, a sobering request begging constituents then regarding their issues just as other prophets of old would do, just as Jesus did, and just as so many prophetic witnesses have risked life and limb down through the centuries and continue to struggle, stiving up to this very minute, even in this time when way too many harbor way too much terror and turmoil, hatred that quenches the spirit and kills the soul, individually and collectively. We have all heard the phrase **“global village!”** Well, think of us as a global congregation, yes, a worldwide church, and imagine Matthew’s careful instructions being the guide and stay for all humanity. After all, congregational conversations are holy conversations and all our relationships, no matter how damaged or disrespected, are holy! Despite the risks, our voices, our voice, must be heard against the cacophony of propagandized rhetoric that swirls in our national and religious commentary. Our testimony, our witness, is vital for such a time as this. So back to us, a word just for us in this place, this sacred setting, continue to love one another as Jesus loved and loves us still. Love those who do not like us, those who are the hardest to love, because love is the way, the truth, and the life. Love God, neighbor, and yes, yourself, always and everywhere! Love is love! Keep on being you, being the church, light illuminating the darkness, good triumphing over evil, sanity amidst the crazy, civility in a nation and a world that is lacking, sorely so, graciously loving one another, **“what a fellowship, what a joy divine!”** Yes, while we lean on everlasting arms!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us to be loving, honest, a prophetic witness in every way and at all times! For such a time as this! Amen and amen.