



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 18A, SEPTEMBER 10, 2023
EXODUS 12:1-14; PSALM 149; ROMANS 13:8-14; MATTHEW 18:15-20

HOMECOMING SUNDAY



Matthew 18:15-20 [Jesus said, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”]

Did you hear the one about the burglar who breaks into a house at night only to hear a strange voice down the dark hallway say,

“Jesus is watching you. Jesus is watching you.” He shines a light to see a parrot who then says, “Jesus is coming for you. Jesus is

coming for you.” The burglar says “Shh” to the parrot, who then says, “Hi, my name is St. Peter.” The burglar says, “Who would name a parrot St. Peter.” The parrot replies, “the same people who named their rottweiler Jesus.”

Happy Homecoming Sunday! Be assured that any dogs we have worshipping with us this morning are gentle guide dogs and animal companions, and the only bird we tend to mention around here is a dove representing the Holy Spirit, who most assuredly speaks into our midst.

In the South, this fall kick-off Sunday is often known as Rally Sunday, which is a mixed metaphor drawing on high school football pep rally and stock car auto racing rallies. The upshot is that the design of the day is intended to be enthusiastic, ebullient, celebratory, even if a bit raucous.

As I reviewed (this) Ministry Directory this week before it went to print, I marveled once more at the breadth of life this community enjoys. Scores of ministries, hundreds of

souls stepping into those ministries, thousands served in Christ’s name here and in the world. Bless you all for your part in this enterprise we call “church.”

You know, wonder, awe and gratitude are said to be spiritual attributes that help us orient to our Creator, and I believe that with all my heart. The Church exists to provide touchstones and guideposts that enable us to hone our practices of wonder, awe, and gratitude, not only as we praise our Maker, but as we move about life on this earth, in the mundanity of our lives, finding ways that allow us to celebrate and see the goodness that is all around us and in us.

This cathedral community embodies such a vocation with grace and good will. The ministries we celebrate today bear witness to that truth. As St. Paul says, we are one Body, many parts, each with an important role in our life together.

When I arrived in 2012, I brought with me what has become something of a Saint Mark’s motto: “Wherever you are on your spiritual

journey, you are welcome here.” Can anything good come out of Arkansas? Well, perhaps a few things, and I would count this motto as one of them. I should say I lifted it from someone who hailed from Mississippi, so there’s that!

“Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here.”

I am glad it has become integral to the identity and ethos of this congregation, and I delight in the ways we strive to embody that statement as a commitment to one another and all whom we welcome in God’s name here.

Of course, we don’t do it perfectly, and the gospel this morning is a gentle reminder that when two or three are gathered, God is there, but also, when two or three are gathered, there will be conflict, division, breakdown in relationships. It is human nature, and the church, however grace-filled and guided by the Spirit it may be, will always bear the marks of our human shortcomings.

Saint Mark’s is not immune to this proclivity. None of us are, and we can all cite times in our lives when, despite our best intentions, the wheels of relationship seem to come right off the rails.

Richard Rohr says we can be right or we can be in relationship. I have to learn this humbling truth time and again, and while on the surface it may look like Jesus, in this passage, is saying go to the person who has wronged you and bend them to your will, there is something more nuanced here.

Just before this passage in Matthew’s 18th chapter is the parable of the lost sheep, and just after this passage is Peter asking Jesus how often should I forgive, and he’s told seventy times seven. Which is to say, a lot.

Much is being written these days about the decline and potential demise of western Christianity and the causes for it. Sociologists suggest it’s due to declining birth rates; others say it’s the disease of affluenza taking pandemic toll on a church that has too long sought comfort and ease. Martin Marty said,

perhaps tongue-in-cheek, that church decline is a result of weekend trips. Will Willimon scoffed it's because Rotary meets at a more convenient time...¹

All jesting aside, and to drive to the heart of the gospel passage, the practice of forgiveness is the spiritual attribute that set early Christianity apart in their imperial setting and caught the attention of people who wanted something more in their lives.

And folks, forgiveness will be the catalyzing mark of the Church that rises from whatever refining fire we find ourselves in today. Conversely, an unwillingness to forgive will rob us of our vitality, the breath of life in this Body.

Which is why, I think, Jesus then said with emphasis, when two or three are gathered in his name, he will be with us. He's all in, and he's inviting us all into this way of life that changes lives, ours first and foremost.

And it's why, I think, the only phrase in the Lord's prayer with a conditional clause is the one on forgiveness: forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

We need not do it perfectly to trust that Christ is here, the Spirit is here speaking her words of hope into our midst.

So let us celebrate. It is good to be here. Welcome home.

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here.

¹ As cited in an essay by William L. Hawkins in *The Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2002-08/unforgiven>