

September 10, 2017 14th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Ezekiel 33:7-11, Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

"Nagasaki survivor devoted life to peace, disarmament" Star Tribune, page A2, September 4, 2017

Grace and peace, beloved of Christ Jesus, grace and peace. Amen.

Mark Hanson, former bishop, former pastor here at Hope, tells the story of Marg Leegard.

Marg and her husband were farmers in Northern Minnesota.

With great wisdom and insight, she once told a group of bishops,

"You know, every Sunday I am sent from worship with the words 'Go in peace. Serve the Lord'.

To which I reply 'Thanks be to God'.

But the next Sunday there is never anyone to meet me asking,

'So Marg, how did it go this week? How did it go serving the Lord?'"

Marg went on to say something like,

"If someone would ask me,

I would have to be honest that it didn't go as well as the Lord had hoped it would.

That should become my confession, our confession as we begin worship."

Dear people of God, how *did* it go this week? What went well? What didn't go so well?

Marg is onto something, something important, and vital, and hard—so hard.

Living the faith as Matthew and Jesus tell it, means telling the truth before God.

What went well? And where did we fall? What hurt? What pained us?

Oh, it's nice to gloss over the rough spots, keep the veneer shinny, avoid rocking the boat.

You know that t-shirt, right?

The one that says, "Keep Minnesota passive aggressive, or not. Whatever you think is best."

But God knows conflict happens, so does misunderstanding, and straight up sin, we mess up.

God knows, and today's Gospel is clear, flow chart clear, schematic clear...

So clear that the model constitution of the ELCA in chapter 15.01 actually cites these verses from Matthew when talking about conflict and discipline.

If someone sins—when *we* sin—first talk one to one, if that doesn't work, bring along another, and so on.

Jesus says this to the church, the ekklesia, literally the gathered ones, but I believed these are words for each of us, and our housemates and all world.

Talk with one another, directly, face to face, person to person.

"It hurts me when you say this, when you do thi." "Or, I'm sorry, please forgive me, I'd like to try again."

On the one hand, after the weeks of parables, this clarity is a welcome relief. Thank you, Jesus.

On the other hand, seeing this only as a code of conduct—do this, then do that—may miss the power,
for I suspect it is relationships that Jesus is most concerned about, not our ability to follow the rules.
Maybe Jesus' hopes for us begin with these steps of guidance, if someone sins, do this,
but then they take root... in relationship, in our willingness to address pain, in confession,
and then in this long process of forgiveness.

A friend tells of growing up in a family dealing with long-term mental health struggles and addiction.

As a child, she'd wake each morning not praying these problems would go unnoticed, as we might expect,
but praying that this would be the day that somebody would say something, would do something.
Unless someone, probably an adult, dared to address all this hurt, my friend and her family scrapped along
best they could mired in pain, seemingly hidden, silent.
She woke up each morning praying that someone would say something, would name the pain, the sin.
That, dear ones, is part of our calling, complicated on so many levels, yes, oh my, we tread carefully and
humbly, and yet part of our calling.
Telling the truth before God. Using our relationships as a means of healing and hope.

I appreciate Matthew's steps, Jesus' steps, simple and hard steps, for they remind me of interventions.
My behavior is getting in the way of life, the people who love me are worried, they're scared, perhaps angry.
They've mentioned it, one to one, and that helped; they've tried again, this time two of them, maybe three...
Finally they gathered up the courage, together, with some planning, to intervene, to explain why this
behavior—or whatever it is—is causing harm, to ask me to get help.
That's Matthew 18, so practical, right there, person to person.
It's not always clean, it's never easy, it doesn't always work the first time,
but binding and losing happens, and that means new life.
In the long journey to the cross, this is the stuff of Good Friday and the promise of Easter new life.
Telling the truth before God. Where two or three are gathered, Jesus promises, I am there.

This morning we will baptize Layla CharJean, beloved daughter of Andy and Leena.

As in all baptisms, Leena and Andy will commit to helping Layla grow in the Christian faith and life.
This week we talked about these baptismal promises. I asked, which elements stand out?
They mentioned how much they value raising Layla in a community of faith,
and how they seek to teach her about this work of justice.

As I stood on Tuesday afternoon in the middle of Franklin Avenue listening to the stories of Dreamers, those whose lives hang in the balance of all this debate over immigration, over DACA, with faith and determination and tears, they bravely spoke their truth, their family's truth with honesty. That's what this baptismal life calls us to: truth telling...what is life giving and what is desperately broken, unjust and mired in systemic oppression.

A man named Sumiteru Taniguchi died recently—he was 88 years old.

He was a teenager, delivering mail by bicycle in Nagasaki, Japan, a mile from the epicenter when U.S. forces dropped that 2nd atomic bomb at the end of World War II.

He noticed a flash in the sky, was thrown from his bike, and rose, his own skin dripping from his back.

While more than 200,000 people died, against all odds, Sumiteru Taniguchi lived.

He suffered years of tremendous pain and decided that he must live on behalf of those who had died.

Sumiteru spent his life speaking the truth he'd experienced, to the United Nations, to the United States, advocating, telling this truth, wherever and however he could.

“I am worried, about what will happen to the world,’ he said [once], ‘when there are no more atomic bomb survivors.’”

He told the truth: he named the sin and the devastation, the pain that it caused.

This morning we celebrate God's Work, Our Hands:

We're collecting food. We're assembling school kits. We're writing letters and calling legislators.

And we're telling the truth.

Like Marg Leegard, that northern Minnesota farmer, and the Dreamers, and Sumiteru Taniguchi, and Layla and all of the baptized, we're inviting one another to tell the truth before God.

How have we been hurt or pained by someone else's sin?

And how have we caused another hurt or pain by our sin?

Oh, I know it's radical, it's counter-cultural, it makes us uncomfortable, and yet Jesus begins, if another sins against you...

As we sing our hymn of the day, look around, see one another with the pain and joy and sin we each hold.

Dare make eye contact, let that be the first step in truth telling.

This, dear people, is God's work in our hands: telling the truth and listening to the truth and making a space for the power of this enacted love to actually set us free. Thanks be to God. Amen