

September 6, 2020 14th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Psalm 149, Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

Grace and peace, in the name of God almighty, God most merciful, God the reconciling spirit. Amen.

When I first came to Hope, I noticed early on how nearly every week we prayed for our partner congregation, St. Peter's Lutheran Church, in Jos, Nigeria.

I had known other congregations with partnerships.

But rarely had I experienced this regularity of prayer for them.

Later in our service this morning, we'll have a special greeting from Pastor Naphtali Randaviba, the pastor at St. Peter's in Jos.

When Pastor Naphtali came to St. Peter's a year or so ago, he reached out and deepened our partnership.

We exchange emails and occasionally do What's App video calls.

He's vigilant about naming their prayer concerns and asking about ours.

We're crossing plenty of lines in these conversations:

oceans and continents for one,

but also gender and race,

and theological and cultural sensibilities.

It was Pastor Naphtali who suggested exchanging greetings.

A week ago I sent them a video message on your behalf, and we included a clip of a hymn we'd used in worship that morning: For the Healing of the Nations.

Today, we get to hear from Pastor Naphtali about St. Peter's, and to deepen our partnership.

In the Gospel and the reading from Romans, the question I hear is this:

How are we going to be in community?

What's this community life that we share going to look like?

How will we love each other?

And as important, what do we do when we disagree?

This feels timely:

Folks are feeling the stress and exhaustion of this season.

Students are moving back to campus, often sharing space.

Families are intensely living together, staying home, juggling work and space and care of those who are younger or maybe older.

Colleagues are finding new ways of working, sometimes gracefully, sometimes not so much.

For those who are living solo, there is still an intensity with friends or family (anxiety does that),
for we need one another and that adds pressure.

Around the community, conversations around race are happening, and these can be hard...

and so important, especially as political divisions promise to grow as the election nears.

Plenty of times these disagreements play out on social media.

Sometimes we just “shut down” and let the walls grow higher

It's easy to demonize each other.

Resentments can fester.

On first listen, today's gospel sounds procedural.

Partly, it is: If someone sins against you, first do this, then do that...

Partly, it may be my desire for some procedures, some steps to follow.

God knows interactions are tough enough, maybe steps will help.

Truth is, I lean into this counsel when there is tension between folks.

It's advice I share:

Talk directly.

Listen.

On a second read, what I first heard as procedure, I now hear as process. .

The issues aren't as clear-cut as Jesus and Matthew make them sound.

Often there isn't one party we can deem as guilty and the other as blameless.

And yet when I hear this as process, I can lean in:

When you disagree, talk with one another.

In talking, listen deeply.

Sometimes this can be done one to one,

sometimes it helps to invite another person into the conversation.

But talk with one another, listen to one another.

While the passage makes this sound like a strategy for individuals,

there's power in using this process as communities.

Many of us have experienced this over the summer.

The Black and BIPOC communities have named concerns and sins to the white community.

In some situations reconciliation is happening.

Other times, this pain, these truths, have been met with resistance.

These are complex issues with layers of meaning, more work is need, reconciliation is our prayer.

For a couple of months a small encampment of our unsheltered neighbors has grown on the east side of our church building.

We've worked hard to establish clear boundaries and to connect these vulnerable neighbors to resources. It's been challenging.

This week the students at PEASE Academy return.

PEASE is the sober high school with whom we've shared a building for 30-some years.

All the students are in recovery.

Anticipating their return, their needs, we asked our unsheltered guests to find other places to shelter.

They've moved on, and yet I'm still mulling over this passage:

it's complex, and living in community we're pulled in many directions.

We're committed to the students of PEASE and there's a basic call of Jesus to offer dignity to our unsheltered neighbors, hospitality to the least of these.

Listening again, I noticed not just procedure and process, but grace—let me end with the grace.

We need God's grace so very badly.

It's that final line: *where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.*

People recite that to me all the time, I say it, too ...where two or three are gathered.

I suspect most of us don't connect that line, with this passage about sin and conflict, how we live in community.

I hadn't.

So here's the grace—indeed, they are connected:

whether as individuals or as communities,

whether in conflict or stress about stuff around the house,

or political divides,

or about the complexity of homelessness or race relations,

wherever we interact, each time we interact, God is there among us.

God is in the conversations.

God is in the tension.

God is in the healing and the reconciliation.

That's a breath of grace, in the complexity of life in community.

Thanks be to God. Amen.