

One of the great philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, Kermit the Frog, once sang, “It’s not easy, being green.” Well, the same may be said for our Christian life together. “It’s not easy, being Church.” What does that even mean, “being Church?” Maybe all we can say is that it means more than the walls of this or any building. Perhaps we might even venture to suggest that “being Church” means living into God’s love as a community. We might even dare to suggest that “being Church” has little to do with these walls or the ministries we can name, but rather has to do with the relationships that inspire us to return to these walls each week, the relationships that drive us to serve one another and the world around us. In our reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans we hear an ideal for “being Church.” This is the Kodak moment of loving God, neighbor, and enemy. Paul exhorts us to simply love one another; this is the summation of the reading from last week where Paul explains that our love should be genuine; we should share ourselves with saints and strangers; we should rejoice with the joyful and weep with those who suffer; we should be humble, live in harmony, and repay evil with love. We have in this epistle to the Romans one of the great articulations of living in Christian harmony. “Being Church” strives for this ideal to become reality. We hunger for it, yet it remains unrealized, as yet. Remember our web-footed philosopher: “It’s not easy...”

In our gospel we find the difficulty of “being Church” in sharp focus. Indeed, the emphasis is on what to do when we don’t get along, when our relationships become broken. As we hear his words we get a sense of what it means to Jesus to “be Church.” We first might recognize that “being Church” means that we are tightly and surprisingly bound to one another. Indeed our connection is such that if someone harms us, “sins” against us, we don’t just ignore them or cut them off. That doesn’t work out well for either party. If I get pneumonia, say, I don’t just kick my lung to the curb. I may want to... But I could not afford to be diminished in that way. In the same way when a brother or sister harms us we confront them with the issue. We speak out, and we especially listen, We strive to reconcile. And initially we do so one-on-one, with the intent to heal and not to publicly shame. What seems countercultural for us is Jesus’ call to bring along others as witnesses, and finally the “church” – the community of faith – to assist in the reconciliation if our initial attempts to reconcile fail. In our culture – which esteems individualism and privacy so highly – this concept may seem foreign and inappropriate. But from the perspective of relationship Jesus is pointing out that what is harmful to the one part affects the whole. If Joe is spreading rumors about Jane, the resulting rift – from both their conflict as well as the contents of the rumor itself – affect the health and well-being of the whole community. Again the human body serves as a good example. My most memorable exams in medical school were the physiology exams, where the professor would ask questions like, “during a meal an otherwise healthy 42 year-old male aspirates a grape into the right main-stem bronchus of his lung. What is happens in his kidneys?” Now the problem is in the lung. What in the world does the kidney have to do with anything? Well, the changes in the kidney are profound as they respond to the noxious goings-on in the lungs. We human beings like to kid ourselves that we are self-contained entities, but in reality we are not that narrow and limited. We are inextricably connected to one another, just as our God is inextricably bound to humanity. This is why we ache to our toes when we see suffering in the household of our neighbor, in the rain-drenched neighborhoods of the Carolinas and Haiti, or in the fear-drenched streets of Darfur. Being Church means being connected, and therefore affected.

From these words of Jesus we also discover that “being Church” means that we don’t give up on one another easily. We are to keep going back to the one who has wounded us with greater and greater intent to reconcile. Perhaps this is another way of looking at the growing

throng of folks we are to bring with us to confront the problem: we increasingly bring all our creative resources and all of our will to bear on reconciliation: kind of like concentric rings of reconciliation. Being Church means persevering in remaining together. Now the easy thing is to just split. Give up. Drive the offender away. Or drive away from the offender. In C. S. Lewis' book *The Great Divorce* hell is represented by a massive gray city that stretches from horizon to horizon. There generally is only one person who lives on any given city block, because whenever neighbors fight – *poof* – a new street appears and the offended party moves further away, and then further away, and so it goes, and so it goes.... Jesus is calling us to do really just the opposite, to bring more and more and more of ourselves with the purpose of bridging a void. If this were a TV show we might call it “Rovivrus”, “Survivor” in reverse. The goal here is to work like the dickens to get people ONTO the island, and keep them there. So perhaps “being Church” means not giving up on each other easily.

Now there is a reality to being Church: some folks just don't want to stay on the island. Jesus acknowledges that there is a limit to what human beings can do. He states that the one who remains unreconciled and unrepentant in spite of the efforts of the whole community of faith should be “like a Gentile and tax collector.” For Matthew's community – which was predominantly Jewish – this meant that such a one was to be considered outside of communal life. In fact this is simply stating the obvious reality: there is a separation; the wall has not come down. And it is perhaps worth noting that such a separation may be due to the harmful behavior of an individual, a group of individuals, or the church itself. Or it may be a simple matter of compatibility: a salt water fish swimming in a fresh water pond; the environment is poison to the fish and the fish is poison to the environment. And so for the good of the member and the greater body he or she is “loosed,” to use the language of the gospel. Not only is the offending party “loosed,” but Jesus clearly asserts in other parts of the gospels that all animosity, anger, unforgiveness, and ill wishes be loosed as well. They have no place in a community seeking to define itself as love.

But our gospel hints that there is more in store for these “loosed individuals.” I find it interesting that they are to be treated “like Gentiles and tax collectors.” As a former tax collector himself – reviled and hated by all Jews – perhaps Matthew knew a little something about God's grace and love. He knew for example that Gentiles and tax collectors were some of Jesus' favorite dining companions. So while these offenders may not safely abide within the community – yet – God never gives up on them. Immediately before this reading in Matthew's gospel Jesus tells his disciples the parable of the ninety-nine sheep safely in the fold, and the one lost sheep that the shepherd searches for diligently and relentlessly until it is found. God never gives up on any of us, in spite of our human failings to reconcile with one another. And that being the case we should recognize that our posture – both as individuals and as a church – is to be open and receptive to the possibility that what had been loosed may later come back.

In the end Jesus is calling us to be agents of reconciliation. How? Robert Frost famously wrote, “Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that sends the frozen-ground-swell under it, spilling the upper boulders in the sun.” Something there is... In our churches and in our lives we humans tend to be good at the wall-building. Christ is that “something there is”, the embodied love of God that wants the walls down, that wants to spill the boulders of fear and distrust in the sun. “Being Church” perhaps more than anything else means striving to become that “something there is,” striving to embody the love of God, striving to work tirelessly to have division and alienation and separation fall away like so many rocks without mortar to hold them together.

Being Church. It is who Jesus would have us live into being. We are powerfully connected. We don't give up on one another easily. And the presence of God is always with us, healing us and helping us to grow into the love of God as a community. It's not easy, as our amphibian philosopher would remind us. But neither is getting two things as dissimilar as blue and yellow to come together. And yet "something there is" brings them together all the time, and the resulting green, my dear Kermit, is just beautiful and well worth it.