

On Being Welcomed Back—Matthew 18: 15-20
(September 10, 2023-15th Sunday after Pentecost)

Wow, a barbeque, games, horse rides, all just to welcome me back?!. Just kidding, for those of you who might not be aware “Welcome Back Sunday” is the unofficial beginning of the church year, where people come back from wherever summer took them and we re-launch the children’s ministry. It just happens to coincide this year with my return from four months away on a combination of sabbatical and vacation. That’s what the first week of September is too many, a quasi-new year, especially with school starting up again. I’m reminded of a first day of school many years back. I’m entering the first grade I believe, it’s either 1974 or 1975, my family having just moved to London, Ontario from a small town between London and Chatham. My mother works in a hospital laundry, my father works construction. It’s hard to get a day off in blue collar shift work, especially for my mother who is only recently hired. My father is in a union job that he’s been at for a couple of years, so my mother asks him to take a day off to walk me to school on the first day. My father can’t see the sense in losing a day’s pay and possibly straining the relationship with his foreman when the school is only 4 blocks and one right hand turn away from our apartment. He wins, for a very brief time. Because while getting there is no problem the way back is another story. It takes me forty five minutes to get home when it should take ten, including being approached by a taxi driver who when I can’t tell him my address leaves me to my own devices. As I said, it was a brief victory for my father, as evidenced not only that evening but by the repetition of this story many times on pretty much every first day of school for years after that. But what a relief for me to eventually see the coin laundry above which we lived and to have my mother welcome me home.

Welcome Back Sunday I think is like that, it’s about finding our way home, on many levels. It’s about returning to community, the people we’ve come to know and whose presence in our lives we hold dear. That’s true, we all yearn for connection. We come for community. Community at it’s best, especially a church community also feeds the yearning for an even deeper connection—a connection with the sacredness of life and our place in it. Without this kind of community, it can be easy to lose our way on the journey of life. Here is where we learn and practice how to find our way home to God, uniting our lives with the rhythms of grace in creation by the practice of love. Here we are invited into the way of Jesus to transform our lives and our relationships.

Isn’t that what our scripture today is about? It’s Matthew’s community using a teaching attributed to Jesus to discern what love might look like in a situation of conflict in the worshipping community. To them, love means showing a high level of commitment to life together in community. It means being forthright and honest about hurts and offences, being vulnerable, listening, seeking to understand, being empathetic, forgiving, being accountable. It means not giving up on people. Even if people refuse to be in community, the community is called to reach out to them non-judgmentally just as Jesus did with Gentiles and tax collectors.

While on sabbatical, I've been reflecting on this question of putting love at the centre of all we do as a church. I've been wondering, what if the only question we ever ask ourselves is, "what does love look like in this particular circumstance?" I think certain temptations and pressures keep us from asking that question and the result is we're a bit lost, we've forgotten the way home. Part of it is, we've bought into the secular value of success, we get anxious when the finances get tight, when Sunday attendance dips, when the Sunday School dwindles and see these issues as problems that need solving, that need our attention. I don't know about you but I find that to be really draining stuff. It's exhausting carrying the burden of an institution's survival. Not only that, when the church focuses its energy on these presenting problems and coming up with solutions as the road to success the fallout is usually expedient but not very imaginative, inspired or for that matter faithful. We wander further and further from home. Lost on a road that is not ours to travel. What if we get back on the road Jesus shows us?

What difference would it make if we started all our deliberations with the question, "what does love look like in this particular circumstance?" What if we committed to honing our skills of discernment to become ever more proficient at identifying what love looks like? What does love look like? It's really the only question worth asking, all else is distraction and misdirection on the way home.

Here's a story about that. Years ago, I do a field placement at St. Mary's Hospital as a student chaplain. It's one of the most anxiety ridden times of my life up to that point. I feel utterly useless in this setting. What use am I as I walk into the room of a thirty-five-year-old father of three who receives a terminal diagnosis only minutes earlier? What use am I as I accompany a mother to identify the body of a child? What use am I to an elderly man who lives alone and is about to lose a leg due to diabetes? What use am I amid both the chaos and professional precision of a code blue? In my supervision meetings, I lay out this despair and crisis of vocation. With help it becomes clear to me I'm asking the wrong question. "What use am I?", is code for "how can I fix this situation?". There's no fixing the situations I describe. There is no path to success. That's the source of my anxiety. Gradually I begin to replace anxiety with faith. I begin to walk into patient's rooms and other situations not asking, "what use am I?", despairing at my inability to fix the unfixable, but rather, "where is God in this situation?", which is another way of asking, "what does love look like in this circumstance?". I begin to lean into the faith that God is already in those rooms and situations and I, at the very least, just need to not be in the way and at best, allow myself to be conduit for the Holy Presence. Almost all of the time, part of the answer is that love looks like my simple non-anxious, non-judgmental presence. I begin to understand what the mystics mean by surrendering your life to God.

This experience helps me understand this scripture this morning in a different way, particularly the saying about Jesus being present where two or three are gathered in his name. Usually, we take that saying to mean something about Jesus being present in the smallest of worshipping communities. Some say, tongue in cheek, that its a comment on summer church attendance. This promise of Jesus' presence, coming as it does after the teaching on conflict, says to us the defining feature of Christian community are people

committed to being together to love as Jesus loved in all areas of their lives. Christian community isn't about joining together with people who all believe the same information about Jesus and God. Being gathered in Jesus' name isn't a claim we make on Jesus for our authority as a church, instead it's a claim that Jesus makes on us. Invoking Jesus' name is an act of surrender to his way of love.

That's what I was learning as a student Chaplain. As I become more confident in asking the love question and see the impact on the interactions I have with patients, I notice I am thinking less and less about myself, that I am more present to people, that the anxiety is abating. I hear the Holy One speak in the deepest part of me, "I don't want you to be a success, with all it's striving against and separation from others. I want you to be healed, made whole by being in right relation with your siblings and thus at one with Me" The Holy One whispers, "you've found your way home not by your own strength, but by surrender to my grace." "Welcome back, welcome home", the Holy One says to me. It was good to be back. It's good to be back. Welcome back. May we seek this path of joy together.

Rev. Joe Gaspar