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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Pentecost 14/Proper 18/Year A/Exodus 12:1-14, Psalm 149, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

“Grace—School of Love?”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

Forty-plus years ago now, when I was first starting my career in the mental health field, a psychiatrist by the name of Dr. Murray Bowen was making a major contribution to the practice of psychotherapy—through his theories and understanding of how families operate as social systems—how families influence the formation of the emotions and personalities of the children who grow up in them. Understanding a child’s behaviors cannot be separated from understanding the relationship networks to which he or she is connected. A field of practice called Family Systems Therapy developed around Dr. Bowen’s theories—and continues to flourish all these years later. This form of therapy has been especially effective in treatment for the families of alcoholics and drug addicts—systems in which the development of overwhelming anxiety can result in family members’ being overly enmeshed with each other and, therefore, having great difficulty behaving autonomously or living differentiated and fulfilling lives. Life centers around the person with the overt symptoms. A great fear of change develops, and, if any family member starts to become healthier and takes steps to move away from family norms, the other members panic and do whatever seems necessary to pull that “wayward child” back into line. As children from these anxious families approach adulthood, they may not be able to make good decisions for themselves—and are often attracted to partners with similar issues. The “new

families” that form end up recreating the dynamics of the “old families.” What is often described as the “dysfunctional” family is recreated from generation to generation.

A few decades or so after Dr. Bowen, Rabbi Edwin Friedman, both a Jewish rabbi and family therapist who knew Dr. Bowen’s work, started recognizing that other social institutions—including churches and synagogues—often develop similarly dysfunctional ways of being and relating. We bring what we learn in our families into groups outside our families, and, over time, for better or worse, we find our “familiar” roles being played out in a different context.

Traditions are quickly established, and, before long, members begin to hold onto them for dear life—even when those traditions have outlived their usefulness and productivity, and may even be having a negative effect. We Episcopalians are notorious for saying, “But this is the way we’ve always done it,” as a way of resisting making changes that might well be sources of new life for the church. I recall our Bishop making reference in the pulpit at Grace to what he called the “Seven Last Words of the Church” —“We’ve never done it that way before.” We’ve often become like the dysfunctional family that allows the most problematic family members to hold the family hostage with disruptive behavior or bullying. Too often we try to placate those persons or keep the peace, and perpetuate the problem, rather than face that situation head-on, in love—and create the possibility of health in the church family.

Today’s gospel reading from Matthew challenges us to do things differently. Jesus is talking with his followers about how to live in community. Dealing with differences in community has always been a major issue and has resulted in church splits too numerous to count over the centuries—and even more instances of people being permanently alienated from any church. Jesus’ demands are difficult. We would rather do almost anything than to

compassionately go to someone we believe has “done us wrong” or “done the community wrong in an attempt—not to “get even” or to punish, but to reconcile and restore unity. Going through the whole process that Jesus describes is advice that is rarely taken. More often we simply maliciously gossip about people behind their backs and occasionally hold grudges for a long time—hurting ourselves and hurting our church.

Unfortunately, the piece of Jesus’ message that is easier to follow is something that has been misunderstood and misused—“if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Jesus’ message about listening and seeking reconciliation gets turned into an encouragement of power and control and even banishment. This verse has been used to justify the practice of “shunning” by certain religious groups. Members are ordered to have no contact with the one who has broken the rules of the group—even if that person is an immediate family member. Shunning is a devastating practice—turning its victims into complete outcasts.

We know the ultimate dangers involved in shunning. It is a form of bullying practiced among children and teens—and even adults. The tragic results that can arise from shunning and bullying and social ostracism make front-page news far too often. We all know stories about young people who have committed suicide after being cyber-bullied. We also know the stories of the lives of those who go into schools and other public situations and randomly shoot to kill. These are never people who have been integrated into loving communities. We cannot afford the cost of making anyone an outcast.

But, the practice of shunning is actually a skewed interpretation of Jesus’ message in today’s gospel. Some scholars think this passage was amended by later editors who apparently

conveniently forgot that Jesus himself never excluded the “Gentiles and tax collectors,” but rather embraced those who were the least acceptable in the eyes of traditional society or the religious establishment.

Paul carries Jesus’ message a step further. He reminds the Romans of the ancient Jewish summary of the Law—“Love your neighbor as yourself.” The Gentiles and the tax collectors are our neighbors. The ones most socially unacceptable are our neighbors. Illegal immigrants are our neighbors, no matter what our political viewpoint. The ones who don’t agree with us or share our values are our neighbors. Paul reminds us that loving our neighbors is God’s command—not just a nice thing to do. Paul believes that it is actually a debt that we owe to God—“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” We are indebted to love—love as a verb—living love in the world.

Brian McLaren, whose most recent book we are finishing up in Adult Forum, believes that the only way the Christian community can survive at all and even thrive into the future is to learn how to love—to commit ourselves completely to the practice of love—love of God, love of ourselves, love of every other human being, and love to all creation. He encourages us to turn our churches into “schools of love,” schools in which we learn and practice and teach the world what love means and requires of us, schools in which we love and support each other in carrying out our one reason for being. Imagine it—Grace Church, a school of love. Paul tells us an amazing thing about how to do it—to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” The very idea is mind-boggling. How are we to possibly let go of our self-centeredness enough to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”—to live our lives from a new perspective, a humble perspective—that we might be enabled to do things that are beyond our capacity—that we might be enabled to love—even and

especially those whom we consider to be unloveable. The only way we can do it is to throw ourselves on the mercy and grace of God—and that is what we are called to do—how we are called to live—surrendering ourselves to God over and over—day by day and minute by minute—becoming transformed in the process. Our Collect for today reminds us that our hope is not in what we can do but in what God can do in us. “Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy.” Amen.