

It is a real question for many of us in these final days, *Will we be able to trust one another again after the election?* A similar question created an undertow for the Followers of Jesus in the decades after the Crucifixion and the forming of local groups who began calling themselves *Christians*, but whose composition threatened deep cracks in the claim of being one Jesus Movement. We tend to see the picture as a friction between Jews and Gentiles, and the New Testament makes that evident, but it is a picture made up of mosaic pieces.

A careful look at biblical sources, but also at letters and other historical records, reveals a kind of crazed surface with many tangible fissures, like a soon to be shattered bowl. As we can readily understand, strong convictions about exactly how to be faithful to Jesus militated against an easy fellowship.

[Jewish but Christian? Torah-observant Jewish-Christian or Torah-free Christian? Homogeneous Jewish-Christian or mixed Jewish Gentile groups? Gentile Christians learning to keep kosher, or formerly observant Jews resisting changes in practice, while trying to accommodate their newly Christian, formerly pagan fellow-Christians?]

It is no wonder the question of how to be Christians **together** hangs like a dark drapery over the relationships and biographies of our revered ancestors in the Church. Tucked into the folds of that fabric, however, are appeals for unity, despite differences, and an opening toward reconciliation. I will focus here on two voices heard in the gospels, each reflecting the principle emphasis of two distinct evangelists.

**Matthew**, the gospel that has been our companion on Sundays through 2020, is most at home delivering the Gospel as a continuity with Jesus' Jewish roots, customs, and way of teaching. Matthew's Jesus accentuates the understanding of Jesus as Jewish Messiah, but opening toward the gentile world in passages that break from the *continuity* motif. Matthew is aware of the danger of disunity for the religion of love.

MATTHEW 18:18

Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, truly I tell you, **if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.**'

21 Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' 22 Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

Notice two things here:

- The highlighted section we often repeat comes between heaven's approval of whatever is decided by Jesus' followers **as a group**, and Peter's attempt to negotiate just how forgiving he should be. Jesus does not negotiate away total forgiveness. Yes, Matthew's Jesus is most comfortable with Christianity as a continuation of Judaism, but does not tolerate holding old grudges.
- Taken together, verses 19 & 20 are chiefly about agreeing. I have heard just v. 20 used most often to say that Jesus and the Church are fully present even in small gatherings of

believers, but as in the preceding and following verses, the melody sings out "agreement."

How will we apply the Gospel to frayed relationships or to a shattering level of distrust between committed patriots and their convictions? See the shy words hiding there in the shadow? **Ask and in my name** signal the posture we are to assume after this election, after every rupture in relationship or community. **We are to be metaphorically on our knees, praying for those from whom we have differed. It's what Jesus would have us do.**

**John**, the Fourth Gospel, often cherished as a Gospel of Love, sings the song differently. You may know I taught for seven years at PLU, and was full-time in the religion faculty, but my main upper division course was the Gospel of John. The best paper I received from any student in that course came from a young lieutenant, just returned from Afghanistan. To my exam question, *What is the meaning of Love in the Fourth Gospel, based on all we have studied in John?* she replied:

In the Gospel of John, *Love* has the same meaning it had for me and my soldiers in battle: **Loyalty unto death.** We did not think about national greatness or the medal of honor or what the commander who sent us was thinking about. We strove to be Faithful to our chief duty in action, our Loyalty to our fellows under fire, their life and wellbeing. It focused our minds and our souls.

Yes, you must be thinking now, Brothers and Sisters, of the words of Jesus in that same Gospel of John.

JOHN 15:12

"This is my commandment, **that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.** 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Here is how I must answer the question in the title of this message to you:

**Yes, we will, we must, and we can through the grace that will be given to us.** We will learn to trust each other and all who have a different point of view, and as we do that better this time, we will be **loyal** to our friendships and civic commitments, and deeply **faithful to our Gospel Values as Christians.**

I once knew a woman whose name was Alfreda B. She had taken a risk in adopting a small orphaned child with a life-threatening disability. Years later I ran into her on the street, and asked her about her son. She said, in tears, "God and I loved it out of him." May we come to say the same about our country, and embrace one another in prayerful thanksgiving.

Let us be praying for one another this next week.

***Joseph, priest***