

Sermon - 6 September 2020 ~ Matthew 18:15-20

As many of you know, I have just about completed the Diploma in Anglican Diaconal Studies at VST, and in fact will be starting my second last course next week. The bad news is that it is a course on homiletics, or preaching, and one of the requirements of the course is that we find a place to preach at least once a month through November. Guess what, this is where I'm preaching! So I beg your indulgence in advance, as you are the ones who will be compelled to endure a rookie. I am so blessed and grateful to be surrounded by so much love and support here as I learn the ropes.

It's wonderful that this is happening now because we are of course reading Matthew this season and I love Matthew. There is so much in this gospel that speaks to me; it is rich with insight and instruction, and has given us many of our most quoted verses.

Today's reading is no exception, for it is a lesson on how we ought to work together, vital for our very survival. We are daily witnesses to the never-ending mudslinging that goes on as part of our political discourse, to the gossip that fills our corridors and to the divided loyalties and political agendas that plague our institutions. The world is ripe with what's called cancel or call-out culture, which is the practice of withdrawing support for public figures or companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive. Our modern world is quick to condemn and immediately effective in its punishments. The modern experience has inclined us to sometimes be hyper critical, to be antagonistic towards one another. To be offended! While doing some reading in preparation for this sermon, I came across a book entitled *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-delusion*, by Jia Tolentino. She speaks of, "the self-deluding dynamics of modern digital life," and our eagerness to criticize. For many years, when I was a teacher, I was in charge of professional development events at my school, mostly because no one else would do it. One day, after shall we say a not particularly successful session, a colleague came up to me and said, "I've lost a day of my life!" I have to say, I was quite taken aback, but you know what they say, those who complain get the job! (The principal bought me a drink at the end of that day!)

Yet for us here at St. Barnabas, none of this really occurs, at least not that I have seen since I have been here. A testimony I think to our conviction to truly live in the name of Jesus Christ.

Matthews words here are instructive on how to resolve disputes, or has he puts it, sins against us. This resolution involves speaking the truth, bearing witness and listening. I truly believe that in our times we have forgotten how to listen. We are quick to react to our supposed enemies, speaking before listening and thinking. One of my personal goals over the coming weeks and months is to try to listen more and talk less. I am, as I'm sure you would agree, a big talker; I love talking, any opportunity I get, but am resolved to maybe do a little less of it in favor of a keener ear. Matthew mentions listening four times in these six short verses, something for which we should take note.

So we are to speak truth and listen, importantly, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. But what does that mean to evoke the name of Jesus? How would this compel us to behave in a particular way? And what is the significance of two or three of us gathered together in his name?

When we evoke the name of Jesus we are conjuring so much. We are proclaiming our faith in his truth and mission, in love, peace, tolerance, hope, salvation and indeed insofar as he was God living amongst us, we are evoking the very creation we share. This is a reminder, however, that just as we may be affronted by those who hurt us, most of us occasionally hurt others, likely unwittingly. Words spoken in earnest can be hurtful, neglect and exclusion are an easy escape, and dismissal of new or different ideas are all too common. And we participate in systematized harm far more than we realize. I am Caucasian, white, and I benefit from that reality. I participate in a system that benefits white people over people whose skin is another colour. I have white privilege. Of course I do not intentionally do this harm; I do not have influence here personally, but benefit I do. But what I can do, personally, in the name of Jesus, is take a stand against such a system. I can vote for people who have the power to change these institutional barriers. When two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, God is indeed with us. Our faith is animated to reflect the life and work of our savior and Lord, who teaches us how to get along, how to live and love as we call forth his name.

If we can animate the life and work of Jesus as we evoke his name, we achieve the kind of unity and reconciliation that is God's prayer for us all. Reconciliation is, after all, about repentance and forgiveness, tolerance and acceptance, hope and love. Remember, we are all condemned and forgiven on the cross. When we gather, in the name of Jesus Christ, forming together our church, let us always remember what that means: to listen, to repent, to forgive and to love, always wrapped in the love of the one who created us. Amen.