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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, September 10, 2023

Proper 18, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary Track 1

[Exodus 12:1-14](#)

[Psalms 149](#)

[Romans 13:8-14](#)

[Matthew 18:15-20](#)

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Those who follow Episcopal Church news online—which is admittedly not a large percentage of the population—have had a lot to talk about this week. Our church, like so many institutions, is reckoning with questions of power and abuse of power, with walking through conflict together while protecting those who are vulnerable and holding those in authority to account.

One of the most important elected positions in our denomination is the President of the House of Deputies. They can be a lay person or a deacon or priest. Our current President of the House of Deputies is Julia Ayala Harris, a lay woman from Oklahoma and the first Latina to hold the position. A week ago she came forward to report publicly that on the day of her election, during General Convention last summer, she experienced a physical assault and sexually harassing comments from a retired bishop. She and another bishop who witnessed the incident filed an official complaint, which has wound its way through the denominational process over the past year.

In the end the retired bishop was removed from some committees, but the church attorney responsible for the case chose not to pursue any further disciplinary action against him. President Ayala Harris in her open letter to the church expressed her disappointment and anger and challenged us to do better. She wrote, “If the president-elect of our House can experience unsafe treatment right at the door of the House of Bishops during the General Convention, then who in our church can truly be safe? If there is no discipline for well-documented violations, then under what circumstances would discipline be imposed?” Her letter has kicked off a firestorm of self-examination in our church. There have been some other high-profile cases lately where it seemed that bishops, in particular, have been given leniency for inappropriate behavior. A group of bishops this week released an open letter saying, “We are angered by and deeply concerned about the perception—or the reality—that bishops get a free pass on behavioral issues.” A day or two later another bishop resigned in the wake of accusations of emotional and physical abuse by his ex-wife and two adult sons.

So it’s been an emotional week for those who follow the inside politics of Episcopal-world; a week that brings home just how ugly sometimes life in the institutional church can be. We might wish it weren’t true, but people bring their bad behavior to church; including clergy; including bishops. I want to say also that this is not always the case. In my own life I have experienced the church as a place of healing and a community of growth toward maturity, truth-telling, and wholeness.

I'm not talking just about the idealized mystical church in the abstract. I have actually grown into a more whole, integrated, truth-telling, healthy person thanks to my experiences as a member of the Episcopal Church, the challenging yet supportive and loving process I was fortunate enough to experience in discernment for ordination, and the parishes I've been a part of. I know church can be that place and part of my life's hope is to help build it more into that place. I want congregations, including ours, to be little cells of health, wholeness, accountability, and compassion that leaven the loaf of our whole society. And I've experienced enough of that to know it's possible.

But I also know the church is not only the mystical Body of Christ but also a gathering of flawed, fallible, sinful human beings, just like any organization or group is. And like any organization the church can be a place of secrets and toxicity, which are even more devastating when they happen in the church precisely because we are supposed to be a place where we live the wholeness and truth of Christ. We have experienced that reality here at Incarnation. Many of you know that back in the 1980s a rector of this parish was found to be a sexual predator, an abuser of children, and thank God was caught and went to prison, but only after causing profound harm to many individuals and communities. Since that time Incarnation has experienced at least two other episodes, much different and more complicated ones but painful nonetheless, in which clergy of this parish have made choices in their personal lives that created breaches of trust and meant they had to resign their positions.

These stories are part of our history. Many of you lived through them. Others, especially those who are newer to the congregation, may not even have heard of these stories—and if my mentioning them today is confusing or upsetting to you, I invite you to come talk with me, or with our other parish clergy, or with members of our vestry. They are not secrets and they do not hold us prisoners today. I mention them because they are part of our story, just as so many churches and schools and clubs and workplaces have such stories. The gospel of Jesus is a gospel of truth, and as Jesus tells us, the truth sets us free.

Today in our passage from St. Matthew's gospel Jesus speaks about conflict in the church. It's a tough, realistic, and compassionate approach. If another member does you harm, first try going directly to that person. If they don't listen, the circle needs to widen: first to two or three fair third parties, then to the wider church. If they still don't listen, Jesus says, "let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Which, in the context of Jesus's place and time, means an outsider. There are genuine consequences to unresolved harm, which can mean the impossibility of continuing to be in relationship in community together.

Yet there's always a pathway back. We can't forget that in Matthew's gospel there are some very important stories of exactly those groups of people, Gentiles and tax collectors, coming to Jesus. There are no outcasts in Christ. The invitation is always there. That doesn't mean a premature rush to forgiveness that ends up taking care of those who do harm at the expense of their victims. It doesn't mean forcing survivors to endure the presence of those who have traumatized them. It does mean that the goal of our life together in community is not to destroy those who do harm but to restore what has been broken.

The path to forgiveness is through truth-telling and amends. It is a tough path. But it is a path that is never closed, and for those who make the choice to walk it, it leads to life.

I believe in the church. What I believe is not that we are an enclave of perfect virtue or even that we are any better than the world of which we are a part. Christians are human beings with the same morass of unresolved baggage, generational trauma, anxious striving, and in some cases outright predatory evil that human beings in general contend with. But I believe we are also the community of friends of Jesus, and that in the friendship of Jesus and in living his way day by day we find ourselves telling more truth, being more brave, respecting one another more, engaging in conflict when we have to in ways that are honest and compassionate, caring more for those who are vulnerable, holding the powerful more to account. I believe we can do better to do those things in our denominational life. I believe we are working always toward those things here at Incarnation. I believe as C. S. Lewis once wrote, next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, the holiest object we can encounter with our senses is our neighbor, and each of us every day in the way we treat one another is contributing to the immortal destiny of beings who are radiant icons of the blazing glory of God.¹ And I believe in the Holy Spirit who opens up new beginnings each day, and in Jesus who is in our midst: for wherever two or three of us are gathered together in his name, he is here among us.

¹ From *The Weight of Glory*; see excerpt online at <https://livingbulwark.net/wp-content/bulwark/january2013p4.htm>.