

I confess that when I started studying today’s reading from Matthew my first thought was: “this is so ridiculously boring and mundane.” Where’s the wild night at sea in the storm? Where’s the feeding of a lot with just a little? Where’s one-two punch of a parable? The gist of it seems pretty simple.

- Strive to get along with each other.
- When someone misses the mark and does something that flies in the face of God’s established order, point it out to them so they don’t do it again.
- If they don’t listen, enlist a few more people for support;
- If all else fails, bring them before the entire community because there is strength and support in numbers. Gotta set everyone straight, right?

That’s when I remembered Jennifer and how people in her faith community tried to “set her straight.” Jennifer is not her real name, but that is the name I gave her in my dissertation. She was one of several hundred adults who had completed a survey and later agreed to let me interview them on what it was like to come of age as an evangelical Christian in the last 30 or so years. As I did for everyone, I asked her to describe what her church and immediate family had taught her—whether directly or indirectly—about sex, sexuality, gender roles, and the relationship between body and soul.¹ Jennifer started out by saying that she had always believed her church was welcoming and accepting.

Then, as a young teen, she became pregnant. Before she could even get used past the morning sickness, the church’s gossip train—with all of its of “tsk, tsks” and disapproving nods—had already circled the block a few times. I could literally feel her disappointment and defiance as she explained what happen: “It’s not like I never judged people before. But I guess what bothered me so much was how people started avoiding me as though they were ashamed of me. Or, they’d make these passive-aggressive comments as though I didn’t know what they were getting at. Would it have hurt anyone to just give me a hug, offer to pray for me (without additional commentary), or throw me a shower like they usually did for new parents. I love my son, but was hurt and ashamed of myself. I think it hurt my parents to see how people treated us, but I don’t know. I was too embarrassed to ask. It was like we had fallen from grace and they weren’t going to even let us try to get back up.”

¹ See Maria Alexandria Kane, “Pretty Girls and Fascinating Boys,” *Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Evangelical Adolescence, 1970-2010*, PhD diss., The College of William & Mary, 2015 (9781339043623).

After her son was born, Jennifer approached her pastor about having her son christened.² The pastor agreed, but on one condition. The baptism would not take place during worship—but after worship, in his office, with only Jennifer and her parents present. Jennifer’s boyfriend, her son’s father, was forbidden. As Jennifer recalled that morning: “Pastor said something about teaching me a lesson, but really? The only thing it taught me was that I was not good enough for them. I felt like trash.” It was at that moment, Jennifer said, that she wanted nothing to do with her church or God for that matter.

More than 15 years later, Jennifer found it easier to “do God” by herself and through nature without “Jesus’ rules” as she called them. What was supposed to have been a joyful celebration of belonging in the presence of the entire church community became a morning of tears, shame, and sorrow. It was a morning that has lasted for more than a decade.

I have no way of knowing if Jennifer’s pastor or fellow church members realized the power of their words and actions to shut out someone from knowing and being known by God. But her story and the stories of hundreds of other men and women testify to church communities and individual Christians like you and me who have abused the words of Jesus in this morning’s Gospel lesson as some kind of search-and-rescue mission. In them, what may seem like a mundane teaching from Jesus on how to set people straight or what to do with people who are “wrong,” is as potent and significant as Jesus walking on water. If we regard his words as a way to “fix” someone then we’ve missed the point because Jesus was focused on how we relate and nurture the faith of those in the church community. Jesus says that if someone errs, if someone “falls short of their totality,” as Gail Godwin defines sin, then we are to be in relationship to them like we would be with a Gentile or tax collector. In other words, we are to treat them no different than ourselves. Love and belonging is still theirs. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (v.17) is not a free pass to unlimited power or authority to decide the worthiness or merit of someone. It’s a reminder that as a follower of Jesus Christ, as someone endowed with God’s Spirit, the life you lead and you relate to others, as a Christian matters a great deal. You have been endowed with God’s Spirit to do God’s work and that is not something we should toss around lightly, taking on and off whenever we feel tired of it. How you regard others has implications far beyond a single moment or so-called lesson because we are all more than our worst moment and our best moment. Every human being is endowed with the spirit and image of God.

² As the case for most evangelicals, Jennifer’s church practiced believer’s baptism, whereby the person being baptized must be able to profess their faith in Jesus. Thus infants were dedicated or christened.

To be clear, this is not a free pass or Get-Out-of-Jail free card for our choices and actions. But if we take a step back from those six verses and remember who Jesus is and what he came to do during his time on earth—we'll see that Jesus isn't providing a template for exclusion or shame. He was the inviting the disciples—and invites us today—to become the kind of community that recognizes that even as we must hold the community and each other accountable to living into our original intention to reflect the image of God, loving the image of God in everyone should be at the forefront. *(I must had an important caveat that this does not mean enduring any kind of abuse, shaming, or degradation. Love is how we regard and treat others, not a pass for others to deny the image of God in us.)*

In a moment we will all participate in a liturgy of belonging. Though today is marked as New Member Sunday, it is less about welcoming new members in to the church as it is about offering ourselves to God and each other as people in need of and in relation to each other. That is a gift and it is hard work. There are times when we disagree and hurt one another. But we are in this together because we are to the witness to the world that love and mercy are the currency of ultimate victory, not exclusion, not judgement, not fear of the other.

[So, as David Lose asks us,] St. Paul's "what kind of community will we be? Because 'community' is all over the place. There are cyber communities, and social-media communities. There are work-related and school-centered communities. Many of the communities we're a part of we fall into as affinity groups—our kids' playgroups, or a running club, or the folks we eat with in the dining room of our college or elder-care facility. All of these communities are different, and each shares distinct characteristics."³ These communities are also nice. But we aren't called to niceness. We're not a social club of like-minded people. We are the very hands and feet of Jesus Christ. [We are more than the pew we sit in each week, and we should live it. In other words, sitting in the same pew is not wrong, but telling someone that they're in "your pew" elevates personal familiarity and comfort over Christian hospitality and embrace.]

³ David Lose, "What Kind of Community Will We Be," *Dear Working Preacher*, August 28, 2011, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1601>.

Do we want to talk about the love of God or strive to live it? Do we want to be a place where you have to have it all together or one where we can admit that we don't have it figured it, we've screwed up, we're uncertain what to do and not be forced to endure a pithy "bless your heart" or easy answer because others are in the trenches with you?

I believe we have been this kind of community, and we must continue to do that as we root ourselves in remembering and embracing—remembering and embracing God's original intent for us;
remembering that baptism trumps citizenship and political affiliation;
remembering that inside and outside these doors we are the hands and feet of Jesus Christ;
remembering our privilege and responsibility.

Above all, remembering that there's nothing mundane or boring about that.

Dr. Maria A. Kane
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waldorf, MD
September 10, 2017