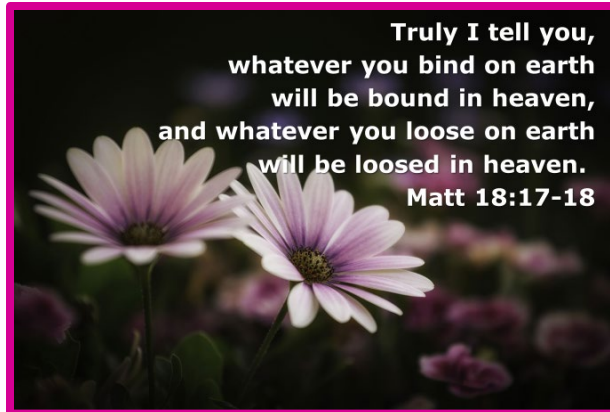


REFLECTIONS FOR THE 23RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 10 November 2023

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Binding and loosening – who binds and who loosens – what do we bind and what do we loosen? Today's readings in the Liturgy of the Word for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time are quite challenging. Therefore, we are tempted to ignore them! Yet the readings speak to the importance of strengthening life in community, the life to which we are called as Christians.



When Jesus refers to binding and loosing in chapter 16 of Matthew's Gospel, he is speaking to Peter and, through him, designated leaders in the community. However, in today's reading from chapter 18, Jesus is speaking to all the disciples, to all of us. Jesus' words to his disciples speak to our responsibilities to each other in community (Matthew actually uses the word "ecclesia" or "church" – the only Gospel writer to do so). The spiritual writer, Jan Richardson, says so well:

Jesus speaks to the challenge and the wonder of being in community. He recognizes that being his follower, being part of his body, will not relieve us of brokenness. Jesus is clear that being Christian doesn't mean avoiding conflict, and that discord should not be allowed to fester and infect the entire body. He lays out a plan that requires his followers to engage a brother or sister who has done harm. His plan is one that seeks to preserve the dignity of the one perceived to have done wrong and to restore his or her relationship with the community. The health of the community requires us to be vigilant about rooting out the sources of harm. Yet Christ calls us to do so with a spirit that acknowledges our own brokenness and shortcomings and seeks to restore relationships wherever possible.

Knowing our own brokenness and shortcomings, we still have responsibility for creating healthy community, for healing and for reconciliation. We do so by living the mercy, reconciliation, and forgiveness that Jesus teaches. Part of our responsibility is to look to address conflict and discord in the community; part of our responsibility is acknowledging our own role in causing that conflict and discord.

Ron Rolheiser omi reminds us of the humility demanded of us so that we will know ourselves as loved sinners, "Recognizing that we're more lovely than we imagine and at the same time more sinful than we suppose can be helpful, both for our self-understanding and for how we understand God's love and grace in our lives. . . We're both good and bad, generous and selfish, big-hearted and petty, gracious and bitter, forgiving and resentful, hospitable and cold, full of grace and full of sin, all at the same time. Moreover we're dangerously blind to both, too unaware of our loveliness as well as our nastiness. To recognize this is both humbling and freeing. In essence, we're, 'loved sinners.' Both



goodness and sin constitute our real identity.” The prophet Ezekiel echoes these same teachings in his call from God to be “a sentinel for the house of Israel.”

Jesus sets the context before this teaching by telling the parable of the good shepherd and the lost sheep, reminding us that we are never forgotten or left out, that we are shown endless forgiveness and mercy. And after the teaching, Jesus adds that our community derives strength from praying together and finds our source of unity in his presence in our midst (Matt 18:20).

The psalmist tells us how we prepare ourselves to bind and loosen in support of building community, “Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah” (Ps 95:8). Our response is to be one of making a joyful noise to our God. Learning from other-than-humans, the psalmist gives us insights into who God is – our Rock, the source of our strength and stability – and who we are in a loving relationship with our God – “For you are our God, and we are the people of your pasture, and the sheep of your hand” (see Ps 95:7). Paul, in his letter to the Romans, describes the core of our relationship with each other, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom 13:8). He goes on to quote the book of Leviticus (which Jesus also quotes later in Matthew), “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Rom 13:9, quoting Lev 19:18). This verse is followed by the haunting words, “Love does no wrong to a neighbour” (Rom 13:10).



Today we know that the neighbour includes humanity and other-than-humans. In this Season of Creation, we reflect on how deeply we are failing to love Earth and Earth beings (human and other-than-human). If we did love our neighbour as ourselves, would there be so much suffering, abuse, violence, pollution, health inequity, climate change, extreme weather events, biodiversity loss, plastic pollution, deforestation, air pollution, melting icecaps and sea level rise, food and water insecurity, fast fashion and textile waste, and soil degradation? Of course not! Pope Francis calls each one of us and our communities to ecological conversion:



By understanding where we belong, and our interconnectedness within the ecosystems that sustain us, we will no longer see God’s creation as an object, there simply to serve our needs, but rather, we come to a deeper understanding of our interdependence and our place of belonging within the delicate web of life. By doing so, we can start to care for each other, as well as the Earth, our common home.

A final reflection on today’s teaching lies in Jesus’ startling words, “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt 18:18). John Kavanaugh sj describes well the impact of these words, “Community life,

whether in a family, intentional grouping, religious congregation, or the church itself, is the great testing ground of faith. St. Teresa of Avila thought that relationships in community were often a greater indication of one's relationship to God than the heights of mystical prayer. Is it any wonder, then, that what we bind and loose on earth is somehow bound and loosed eternally? Our human relationships mirror our relationship with God. Whenever we encounter each other – not only in prayer – Jesus is in our midst.” Our human relationships mirror our relationship with God – human relationships which are with humans and all other Earth beings.



If we truly believe the learnings from the new cosmology, we are aware that we humans are part of the sacred communion of all creation. This sacred communion begins at the moment of creation and extends across all time and space, in the words of Kathleen Coyle ssc, “Our personal stories can be traced back to a time before the earth was formed, back to a generation of stars now gone forever, but whose violent deaths transformed the hydrogen of the stars into the dust that eventually became our planet – and our flesh.” Our every word and action, our binding and loosening, our goodness and our brokenness, are all embedded in that sacred communion. Each creature images God in a manner unique to its species, and each creature contributes to the web that sustains all of life, in ways that we are only beginning to discover. Yes, what we bind on Earth will be bound in heaven and what we loosen on Earth will be loosened in heaven!

In a recent talk that I presented at the Canadian Religious Conference, I spoke about “letting go” and “letting come” as a necessary way into the transformation needed for our society, for our church, and for communities. This is my way of expressing “binding” and “loosing” for us as Christ-followers today:

- letting go language about despair and loss; speaking with new life and hope,
- letting go dreams marked by victory; replacing them with dreams marked by inclusion,
- letting go walking away from grieving community; walking together with those most at risk,
- letting go a church that is exclusive and hierarchical; shaping a church that is inclusive and open,
- letting go controlling outcomes; growing into deep contemplative listening,

- letting go seeking perfection; resting in the surety of our brokenness,
- letting go always needing answers; rejoicing in living with the questions,
- letting go needing to know everything; trusting in communal discernment,
- letting go stereotyping and judging others; warmly welcoming diversity in all its ways,
- letting go always needing to prove we are right; calling forth healing and reconciliation,
- letting go wanting to be masters of Earth and Earth beings; becoming good and gracious guests of Earth,
- letting go our need as humans always to be at the centre; delighting in the sacred communion of all creation.

This week, take time to imagine what your list for letting go and letting come, for binding and loosening, would look like? Where should we be binding and where should we be loosening? Lest we be concerned about our role in binding and loosening, about holding such power and responsibility, this poem-prayer by Steve Garnaas-Holmes gives us comfort:

There is power in your choices, in what you “bind” and “loose,”
 what you require of others and what you forgive,
 what you hang onto and what you let go of.
 You are given power to oppress and to set free.
 Don’t worry about such power put in your wild, immature hands.
 The Gentle One is there with you, between you and each other person.
 Treat them so, and your power will be well used.
 You yourself will be loosed from temptation,
 bound to the One from whom you will not be loosed.

