

***Journeying through the Revised Common Lectionary***  
Readings, Commentary, and Discussion Questions for September 10, 2017  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18

**THE READINGS**

**First Reading: Exodus 12:1-14** *Alternative: Ezekiel 33:7-11*

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.”

*Worth Noting: The passover of the LORD marked the start of the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery. Today, the Passover meal celebrates freedom of communities to prosper in their own inimitable way. How and when do you celebrate your freedom to be yourself?*

**Psalm 149** *Alternate: Psalm 119:33-40*

Praise the LORD!

Sing to the LORD a new song,

his praise in the assembly of the faithful.

Let Israel be glad in its Maker;

let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.

Let them praise his name with dancing,

making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.

For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;

he adorns the humble with victory.

Let the faithful exult in glory;

let them sing for joy on their couches.

Let the high praises of God be in their throats  
and two-edged swords in their hands,  
to execute vengeance on the nations  
and punishment on the peoples,  
to bind their kings with fetters  
and their nobles with chains of iron,  
to execute on them the judgment decreed.  
This is glory for all his faithful ones.  
Praise the LORD!

### **Second Reading: Romans 13:8-14**

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

*Worth Noting: Paul urges the Romans to avoid entanglements in anticipation of the coming of the Lord. Two thousand years later, does this advice still make sense? Will our commitments keep us from the Lord or bind us more closely?*

### **Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20**

[Jesus continued speaking with his disciples.] “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 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.

“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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

*Worth Noting: Throughout chapter 18, Matthew proposes ways for communities to operate when the Kumbaya moments are over. This selection concerns reconciliation with those who have injured individuals and hence the community. How well would these rules work in your family? At your place of employment?*

## CONNECTING WITH THE SCRIPTURES

### Entering into the Scriptures

Careful readers have concluded that even if Matthew's community did not follow the process laid out in chapter 18, this is the process Matthew hopes the community *will* follow. In formulating the process, Matthew drew on the wisdom and experience of the wider Jewish community. For instance, Deuteronomy 19:15 requires two or more witnesses for conviction of a crime. Leviticus 19 urges reproving erring neighbors. Closer to Matthew's community, Dead Sea Scrolls show that the Qumran community included a similar judicial process.

Matthew adds his own twists in this formulation. First of all, Matthew 18:20 – “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” – is often associated with liturgy and prayer: where two or three Christians gather in prayer, Jesus is in their midst. While true, Matthew is making another, equally critical point. Where two or three are gathered in his name to decide on the future course of the community, there is Jesus as well, informing their spirits and, we might assume, weighing their decisions.

A second twist is Matthew's insistence that anyone who refuses to listen to the church shall become “as a Gentile and a tax collector.” This sounds like expelling the miscreant from the community without any further relationship. Perhaps the saying should not bear that connotation. It must be remembered that throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus ministers to just such as these: Gentiles (the centurion [Matthew 8:5-13]; the Canaanite woman [Matthew 15:22-28]) and tax collectors (among his apostles [Matthew 9:9; 10:3]; sharing meals with them [Matthew 9:10-13]). Even though these may not be included in the community of Israel, Jesus reached out to pull them in. Does Matthew not tell us that Jesus expects that the community will continue to minister to those who are as Gentiles and tax collectors?

### “They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love”

What's the most damning thing observers might say about our churches? How about: “Well they *call* themselves Christians, but they certainly don't *act* like Christians!” We profess to follow Paul's command to “Love one another” (Romans 13:8-10). Yet however much our congregations collect for disaster relief, however chic our new web site, however captivating the sermons, how we treat each other speaks louder. Often, our parish communities, like some families, are highly dysfunctional, with verbal and emotional abuse never far away. How to remedy this?

Now Paul is a results kind of guy, not much interested in process. In the case of congregational controversy, the passage from Matthew gives some directions.

*Due process.* Jesus lays out a process for reconciliation and judgment that involves the whole community. Individual, snap judgments are excluded. Love is considerate, deliberate, formed in a community, and slow to punish.

*“Go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”* Love is never two-faced. Love does not engage in backbiting, shuns and halts damaging, speculative gossip, and deals forthrightly with controversies in the community.

*They shall be to you as Gentiles and tax collectors.* Even in extreme cases, love maintains a relationship with those “expelled” from the community. Love builds bridges and tears down ramparts. Love strives to include, and sees exclusion as failure.

We may think that these admonitions are meant primarily for smaller ecclesial units – particularly smaller parishes. Indeed, it is easiest to see how they work in such a setting. On the other hand, are not all of our institutions composed of smaller units: Committees and offices and commissions? Aren’t those the settings where all the work gets done, “where the rubber meets the road”? And as we transform each parish, each committee, each office into a place of love, will we not transform the institutions we serve?

### **Prompting Conversations**

Have you witnessed a positive transformation of a dysfunctional parish, congregation, or committee? What were the steps undertaken?

Perhaps your community does not engage in any formal excommunications or other expulsions. Are there informal ways that force persons out of the community? And in a broader view, how can we build a relationship with those “outside our community”?

What might it mean for our institutions – political, commercial, religious – to live out Paul’s command to “love one another”? Would debate cease? Would debate sound different?



Dennis Haugh has enjoyed working with adult seekers for over 20 years. He aims to engage academic and general audiences for the New Testament. He earned his PhD in Biblical Studies in the University of Denver/Illiff School of Theology joint program. He appreciates any correspondence: [dennishaugh2011@gmail.com](mailto:dennishaugh2011@gmail.com).

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