

Bound Together
Pentecost 13A
PPC
30 August 2020

Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

I love Broadway musicals! A truly American form of theatre, I began to collect vinyl recordings of musicals when I was a teenager. There is nothing more thrilling than the moment when the lights go down and in a darkened theatre the orchestra begins the overture. This is a long way of saying that often, unbidden, when I am confronted by thoughts that disturb or confuse, suddenly into my brain a song from a musical springs up that makes connections for me.

In today's reading from Matthew, I began to hear strains from the musical, *Carnival*. Lili, the main character of this story, is a young girl who has run away from home and joined the circus because her parents can no longer afford to keep her. Upon her arrival at "La Cirque de Paris" she sings to her new friends, several of whom are puppets. She sings to them about her hometown, Mira.

"I come from the town of Mira,
beyond the bridges of St. Clair,
I guess you've never heard of Mira,
it's very small, but still, it's there.
They have the very greenest trees
and skies as bright as flame
but what I liked the best in Mira
Is everybody knew my name.
can you imagine that?
can you imagine that?
Everybody knew my name.

This past week has made me feel that I no longer live in a country where anybody knows anybody else's name. We are strangers to one another. Policemen, those who are charged with

our protection, can try to pull a Black man from his car, pulling on his T-shirt and when he won't comply, shoot him seven times in the back. Seven times! Jacob Blake is now paralyzed from the waist down. The next night, as protestors were marching, a young 17 year old boy comes to town from another state and ends his evening by murdering two of those protestors and injuring another.

Who are we? How did we get here? I don't recognize this place where anger and fear are causing us to turn on one another. Sadly, what seems to have awakened us as white people in this time of upheaval is that now white people are experiencing some of the behavior that Black people in this country have experienced for centuries. Where were we all when four young Black girls were murdered by an explosive device that was hurled into their church, on a Sunday morning? Apparently, the destruction of property, as some white supremacists are yelling about, is what is driving those heavily armed men into the streets: they feel called to protect other white people's property. We are more upset about property destruction than the murdering and injustice that continues to be perpetrated against people of color. "A riot" said the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, sixty years ago, "is the language of the unheard." What will it take for us to hear?

What I hear everywhere I have been in my ministry, is a yearning, a longing, to return to those times when community existed for us. People of every color can remember times when, as children, up and down your block, other adults knew who you were and called you by name. Even called you out when you were misbehaving. We all want to return to those times when neighbors gathered together for block parties, when our churches offered fellowship to the youth. Where has that time gone? When I was growing up we knew our postman's name and when we

walked into our village the proprietor's of different stores knew we were the children of Phil and Jann Packard. We felt safe in the world.

Authentic community is hard to come by. We have lost the ability to create it. Where true community exists, though, it's a bit of heaven on earth. It's the kingdom of heaven right here on earth.

What makes this kind of community so difficult to attain in these days is the coronavirus. We do our best - we create times when we can be in touch with one another on Zoom - but it's not the same as being together. We are going to have to work harder at maintaining our sense of community.

Community is not an abstract ideal. We are called to love one another - you and I - just as we are, warts and all. Kathleen Norris in her book *Amazing Grace*, writes about the day, after much deliberation, when she made the decision to join the small Presbyterian church in South Dakota where her grandparents had been members. She stood with the other new members at the front of the church and felt a warmth creeping into her soul when she was officially recognized as a new member. However, later that morning, she recalls, as she was being served communion, she was seated next to another new member. As he passed her the communion tray, she realized how very much she disliked this man. But, here she was being served communion by him. In that moment, she reflects, she understood in her soul what the church had to say to us about community. She could sit by this man's side, accept the communion tray from him, and know that though they might not like each other, they were bound together by a greater power.

It is this community that Jesus is talking about when he says, "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." What you choose to hang onto, especially feelings of anger, jealousy, bigotry or any of

the “isms” such as sexism and racism are a deterrent to the building up of community. We need to do some personal housekeeping as we examine what it is that keeps us from contributing to the building up of community.

Where are you right now in your thoughts about community? How do you love your neighbor? Are you able to see Christ in the other person’s eyes? To be a Christian community it matters how we treat one another now, in this moment. This is part of the great mystery of faith - heaven is now and heaven will come. Jesus is answering the question of how we can experience God’s presence in the moment. Whatever your actions now, whatever your thoughts are now, these will determine what heaven is and will be.

Several years ago as I was counseling one woman she told me the story of her relationship with her children. She had nine children and eight of them had become what our culture would describe as “very successful.” Her youngest son had lived most of his life as an alcoholic. For much of his life he was a challenge and painful reminder to his siblings of the obstacles this family had had to overcome. Much to his mother’s joy, this son found sobriety in the last three years of his life. She was given three years of happiness in his newly found sobriety. They spent much time together. His siblings, however, would have nothing to do with him. They mistrusted his hard-won sobriety and didn’t believe that he was anyone worth getting to know. His death came suddenly. What was especially heart-breaking to this mother in the present was for her to see how hard her other children have taken his death. Full of remorse that they behaved so badly, their grief is complicated by their guilt. This is hell.

What do we bring to a place?

It matters how we treat each other. Black lives matter. If we speak the words but do not follow those by actions and the transformation of our hearts, we are as Paul wrote “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1).

Community today is all over the place. There are cyber-communities, sports communities, video game communities and other niche types. There are work-related and school-centered communities. Many of the communities of which we are a part fall into affinity groups - our kids’ sports groups, a skiing club, a running club, a bridge club or a Mahjong club. All of these communities are different and are important in our lives. The question for us is, what kind of community do we seek by coming to church? What do we want to see happen here? Will we be largely social and somewhat superficial? This is certainly a safe place in which to reside. We don’t have to give much of ourselves. Or, do we want something more meaningful and intimate which is riskier and harder to achieve?

If we want a community where we are vulnerable and known to one another, then we must all invest in our church community. We can’t depend on someone else to do all the work to create this place. Are we looking for a place where we can be honest about our hopes and fears, dreams and anxieties? Do we want a place where we can just blend in or are we looking for a place where we can really make a difference?

If we can achieve this kind of community, will it make a difference to the fear-mongering and hate that seem to fill our lives today?

Growing a church community is not necessarily about getting more bodies in worship. It can be about growing individually, working toward building a healthy congregation, making your Christian community a priority in your life.

All during a pandemic, of course! So, perhaps another view of this community is to be kind to ourselves and recognize what we can and cannot accomplish in the midst of social distancing.

Lili, in her song about her hometown, paints a picture of a place that we all want to be. In our dreams, at least. Small towns do have their drawbacks, too. Can you imagine a community where we know each other and in that knowing continue to work for the health of the community? A place where automatic weapons have no place? Can you imagine that?

Christ calls us into that community. We must first let go of all that works against the formation of such a place. Are you willing to loose all so that we can build a community gathered in Christ's love?

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

How we need that community today.

AMEN.