

# CORRECTING YOUR INNER TAX COLLECTOR

Almighty God, you search us and know us: may we rely on you in strength and rest on you in weakness, now and in all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*A Collect for Proper 18A, Additional Collects, Common Worship, The Church of England*

## THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proper 18A: Ezekiel 33:7-11; Psalm 119:33-40; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

SEPTEMBER 10, 2017

### ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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#### THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 18:15-20

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you’ve won over your brother or sister. But if they won’t listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses. But if they still won’t pay attention, report it to the church. If they won’t pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector. I assure you that whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven. Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.”

Did you hear anything fishy in this gospel reading?

Anything seem a bit askew?

First of all, we are hearing Jesus speak about “the church.” It’s hard to see what’s wrong here, except to say that there was not a “church” when Jesus was speaking – that would come later.

Second, Jesus speaks about gentiles and tax collectors here in ways that give an impression that

they are to be shunned and avoided. But Jesus actually embraced and welcomed gentiles and tax collectors.

And from that, there’s that whole sour note of exclusion, when Jesus was consistently focused on inclusion.

Where did this reading come from? Was someone putting words in Jesus’ mouth?

Matthew’s gospel was written

around 70 a.d., after the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, where the Islamic shrine, the Dome of Rock stands today. The Western or “wailing” wall is a remnant of that Jewish temple.

That cataclysmic event caused Jews to struggle for their identity, as was intended by the Romans in their desecration of the holy site. And that struggle for the Jews was made more difficult by the presence of a Jewish group among them called “Christians” who were followers of a Galilean Jew who had been crucified by Rome decades earlier, whom they recognized as the risen Messiah.

Not surprisingly, the group of Christians within the group of Jews was also struggling with identity, and in that time of uncertainty, following a typical human impulse to define the boundaries and decide who was in and who was out. Anxiety, fear, make people do this sort of thing – create insiders and outsiders.

So this is what we are hearing in this gospel reading this morning. Yes, words being put in Jesus’ mouth, words that had the aim of excluding some and including others – including those who were deemed, at the moment, anyhow, “true believers.”

But, no, it doesn’t sound very much like Jesus who worked to

embrace others – especially those who were outsiders and on the margins including gentiles and including Matthew who was, yes, a tax collector.

So what do we make of this passage of scripture?

Any number of things: when people struggle and get fearful we tend to get smaller and create cut-offs, we tend to lose vision and focus only on our own interests – and survival is a powerful interest.

Isn’t it interesting that Matthew the tax collector was ready to close the door on tax collectors once *he* got through it. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?

And then there’s the larger observation we can make. Did this passage of scripture result in a pure church with clearly defined boundaries that was vital and vibrant and strong, a church without fear or division or conflict?

No, of course not, because human beings are good at proposing systems and strategies and plans and methods and lists and formulas that not only don’t work but usually make matters worse. This very passage of scripture is probably responsible for the creation of hundreds of separate denominations, little groups broken off of little groups: the Alliance of Baptists, the American Baptist Association, the American Baptist Churches, the

Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America, the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, the Baptist Bible Fellowship International, the Baptist General Conference, not to mention, the Southwide Baptist Fellowship, the Sovereign Grace Baptists, and the Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists... and so on and on and on....

So how do we live with one another?

I'm not going to propose a system.

But my eye and ear caught a phrase from Paul's letter to the Romans: "The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep."

Awaking in the presence of God allows us to be present to God as well as to one another – not, narrowly, to ideas or thoughts about one another that may be running through our minds but to the actual, lived reality of who we are individually and as a community – and to the world as it is around us, the world that God so loves. What awakens you to God, to life, to others?

We can see that we need to approach scripture with a deep love and deep respect that also requires us to see it for what it is and for what it isn't and to read and discuss it critically, mining it for its depths and understanding both the

wisdom and the stresses being lived by the people who wrote it, wisdom and stresses very much like our own.

Especially as we begin a new program year and bear with us our hopes for our life together, and particularly what we aim to do as a faith community, including our program of faith formation for children and youth, we are likely going to be living with both what we want and what we struggle to have, our successes and our failures, what is perfect, and what will never be perfect, what is exciting and what is boring.

What challenges us is also what wakes us up and gets us ready for more of the totality of God, God who is Reality, who is Source, who is Life itself and who offers us more than we imagine, more than we recognize, often more than we desire, both pain and bliss.

The revelation of God, of the Sacred, the Divine did not end in the days described in the Bible but continues today, continues in you and in me and in what we do together, continues in this neighborhood, among all people, whether self-described as "people of faith," or not, continues in the whole created realm around us, continues in what we expect and in what surprises or shocks us, continues in what is familiar, what is strange.

And so, Jesus didn't actually offer the kind of system or method for deciding who was in, who was out as in this gospel reading. But Jesus did say, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

In this love, love that is fluid

and immediate, that comes from Love Itself, there is room for all, and a place for all, all people, all of what we experience, the building up and the tearing down of the temple, the search for identity and what clues we find, for all we long to do, for what we achieve, and for our failures, for all that has been, all that is, all that is yet to come....



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