A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*Amo Ergo Sum*

Romans 13:8

Sep 6, 2020

In this morning’s New Testament readings, we are renewed in a mystical vision of God’s presence in and through Christian friendship, and we hear practical wisdom about how to sustain such friendship in the face of the challenges within us and between us that tear us apart. When dealing with everything dividing us and tearing people apart these days, thanks be to God for the good news of these assurances.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew 18, Jesus promises, “Where two or three are gathered, I am there in the midst of them.” What a gift this is, this affirmation of the spiritual significance of church, of friendship, of being together. He doesn’t just say where even a small group is, that’s a good thing--he says, “I am there in the midst of them.” The triune God, eternally bound in love affirms human community and friendship as a temple on earth where God is active and present. Where two or three are gathered, the compassionate life-giving heart of God is there.

The context of this promise is as gritty as when things go wrong with human community, not when everything is going right. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus tells a parable in which a shepherd leaves 99 sheep in search of one that is lost. God wants no one to be left behind. That parable is followed by a lesson on how to work toward reconciliation when a relationship is broken. It’s a model of courageous confrontation in community. The hope is always for reconciliation. In Jesus’ eyes, reconciliation among friends is worth whatever cost you have to bear to make it possible. The cross bears out this witness.

The disciple Peter, undoubtedly speaking for the other disciples, and frankly, for everyone who has ever lived, comes up to Jesus and presses the clear and obvious problem: Lord, how often must I forgive. Seven times? He asks. Not seven but seventy times seven, Jesus replies. Reconciled friendship is so important to Jesus that he would call upon a person to forgive, and forgive, and forgive some more. Even in the wisdom of how to bring about reconciliation through confrontation, the pulsing heartbeat of relationship and love is forgiveness.

It took me years of ministry to begin to understand this. Of course, I have had some forgiving to do along the way of people who have hurt me. And there are others who have had to face forgiving me for the hurt I have done them. Life is messy, and we hurt one another sometimes even unintentionally. When a relationship is worth saving, forgiveness will be part of the journey.

Early on in ministry, after being married a few years and watching marriages blossom and some wither, I started counseling engaged couples with the wisdom that there are a few things you need to get squared up on for a marriage to be happy. I’ve shared this before with all of you but it bears repeating. There were 4 areas I focused on:

*Faith*: How do you live your faith and relationship with the church?

*Money*: How do you earn, save, and spend money?

*Intimacy*: How do you practice intimacy in our words and actions? And how do you not do it with other people. That’s always a good starting point.

*Children*: How do you raise, discipline, and empower your children?

Each of these areas can be the source of great joy and great pain. If you have basic agreement and foundational health in these four areas, most marriages do well no matter what other challenges come along. These are the pillars. I still believe that, but I learned along the way I was missing something vital. It’s a fifth pillar. It’s this:

Can you forgive them before they’ve even done it? Forgiveness is at the heart of love. And love is at the heart of the Gospel and at the heart of what it means to be human.

Some years ago, the chaplain at Yale University, William Sloan Coffin (1924–2006), observed how those young, bright students at Yale “thought *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) was what it was all about, and Yale was encouraging them to think that." Coffin suggested a subversive counter-proposal: "I felt very deeply that it’s *amo ergo sum* (I love, therefore, I am).” They were learning to think, but not learning to love.

Coffin was not the first to recast the modern notion of being from I think, therefore I am to I love, therefore I am. Poets such as Kathleen Raine and Robert Laurence Binyon have written poems with this same title, each exploring the implications of sacred understanding of human nature as fundamentally bound in relationships of love. Amo, ergo sum. I love, therefore I am.

Dan Clendenin alerted me that this Latin phrase can be translated slightly differently to make the point more radical: "I am because I love." Or as Wendell Berry put it, “I only live to the extent that I love.”

In his book of poetry called [*Leavings*](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/BookNotes/Wendell_Berry_Leavings.shtml) (2012), Berry points the way for us in a short poem-prayer:

           "I know that I have life
only insofar as I have love.

           I have no love
except it come from Thee.

           Help me, please, to carry
this candle against the wind."

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1491-our-unpaid-debt>

The winds that blow against the light of love are blowing awfully hard these days. This week, the New York Times reported that for the first time since WWII the United States debt is now equal to the size of the entire economic output of the nation. If we were to pay off our debt this year, we would have to spend an amount equal to the whole economy. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/02/business/us-federal-debt.html?fbclid=IwAR119OUWK6kginEhpyVqddnDdKRQXiM2Qy27Y05PI534WHof1RrxFEIpBZY>

But we also have a national debt of love. You can’t quantify this debt, but you can sense it in the air. You can see it on your screens. You can feel it in your body. I was down the rabbit hole of inflammatory, caustic social media stuff recently when I came across a simple post, one of yours actually, that said, “I don’t know who needs to hear this, but lower your shoulders from your ears, take a deep breath, and drop your tongue from the roof of your mouth.” I thought my shoulders are ok; I’m breathing just fine. Then I realized just how firmly my tongue was digging into the roof of my mouth. I didn’t know that was a thing that I did. I’d heard of a tongue in cheek. I’d heard of grinding teeth, but I’d not heard of tongue on roof of mouth. I dropped my tongue, and immediately felt some unexamined tension release.

I felt more at peace immediately. Love your enemies Jesus says, even through clenched jaws until you can love them with whole hearts.

St. Paul writes to the Romans, “Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another.” It’s such an ironic turn of phrase that I wonder if Paul was writing tongue in cheek. Owe nothing to anyone, except for everything. Have no debts except for the debt you can never pay off, the cost you can never fully bear, the weight you can’t carry alone. Owe nothing to anyone, except that which will cost you everything. The debt of love between two people is more important than all the national debt we can accrue.

Forgiveness is the lifeblood of love. When mutual love and forgiveness are at the heart of the relationship, it can absorb a lot of pain, failure, and conflict. It can do so confident that whatever the issue is that needs to be worked out, love still remains. We’re told the shape of love is a bright red heart. But we know the shape of love is a broken heart, stitched together at its broken places.

Where two or three are gathered together, if they are gathered together long enough, in marriage, friendship, roommates, family, colleagues, there will be pain, failure, conflict, and disappointment. And I think this is why Jesus elevates the meaning of friendships--Christians friendships in the church to the highest possible exalted place. Where two or three are gathered, I am there in the midst of them. I am there.

I am there. The promise of Jesus presence in a gathering of friends, recalls the identity Matthew gives him in the opening chapter of the Gospel: *Immanuel. God with us*. And it looks forward to the promise given in the last verse of the last chapter of the Gospel, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” From beginning to end Matthew’s Gospel presents a God who is intimately, powerfully, redemptively present with us through the incarnation, through the church, and through the promise of God’s faithfulness for all time.

Once you start noticing it, you can’t unsee it. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is everywhere, never far removed from us, especially in our broken, hurting places. Immanuel. God with us: in the storms of life, Jesus walks out on the sea (Ch. 8); where two or three are gathered (Ch. 18) “I am there;” in the least of these, “when you did it for them, you did it for me” (Ch. 25); in the bread and wine of Eucharist, “this is my body, this is my blood” (Ch. 26); in the mystery of the resurrection, “I am with you always” (Ch. 28).

In our verse this morning, Christ is present in the midst of the gathering of the church. This is no romantic, wispy, idealized version of utopia. Where Jesus is, there is the cross. Where two or three are gathered, I am there; the cross is there. By the cross, what is broken in us is restored; what is broken between us can be renewed. What is broken between us and God can be made whole. Joining us in broken places, in places of our suffering, Jesus makes strong the broken places.

I don’t know why it took me so long to understand that forgiveness is the heart of love, in marriage and in everything else. I should’ve seen it all along. Our faith tells us that we are broken, sinful people who find the path to freedom is paved with honest confession of sin and acceptance of unmerited grace. Our faith tells us that grace is not cheap; it is costly. The price has been paid by Jesus, who bore the cross that we may be redeemed and renewed. We repeat over and over in our confessions, prayers that we are sinners in need of redemption and gratitude for all that God has done to make it possible. In Christ, we are being redeemed. Praise the Lord, we sing a new song.

Where two or three are gathered, I am there in the midst of them. Of course, he is. If he weren’t, two or three couldn’t last very long as even two or three. Everything about our fallen nature pushes against others in our lives, pushes them away just at the place where we need them the most and need Christ in and through them the very most, which is usually the place where we are broken or weak or suffering and need to be knitted back together. It’s the place of love, and God is right there.

Thanks be to God.

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