

Rev. Lynne Ogren
September 6, 2020

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
14th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

This week one of our congregation's young adults began his journey toward becoming a doctor. Anders Pederson participated in what is known as the "white coat ceremony" when first year medical school students receive their white coat and stethoscope that identify them as doctors.

But Anders is just beginning. He hasn't even completed one semester of classes yet. Still, he and the other students begin taking on the role, and the identity, of doctor, even as they grow into that title over the next several years.

On this Labor Day weekend, we might think of other occupations that have outward markers to help the rest of us recognize who people are. Many pastors and priests wear a shirt with a special collar like I sometimes do. Some wear those shirts every day and some, like me, only when we are presiding at a particular service or when we think it would be important to be recognized by others as a clergy person.

Clothing isn't the only identifying marker of a person's role or position. Some might have an official name badge. Those in the military often have a trademark haircut—particularly the men. And there are the caps or hats or books that are the distinguishing symbols of a rancher or farmer.

The old saying, "the clothes make the man" may still hold some truth today, but we also know that just because you wear a suit, or a uniform, or a name badge doesn't mean that you embody that role. It is in our actions, the ways we live and interact with others, that most clearly shows the world who we are. And if we are not clear about who we are, the world will not know how to receive us.

The scripture readings today focus on what it means to be identified with Jesus Christ, and the fullness of our Triune God—Creator, Redeemer, and the Spirit who dwells with the people of God. And we embody our Christian identity in relationship with others. Being a Christian is not a private, purely personal, thing. We are Christians in relationship with God AND in relationship with the world around us.

Last week we talked about the shift in both Paul's letter to the Romans and in Matthew's gospel from a focus on who God is, especially as seen in the life of Jesus, to how we are called to live in response to God's relationship with us. This is the focus for the next two months in our worship readings. Who are we in relationship to Christ, and how do we live in ways that identify us as God's holy and beloved people?

We begin today with the grounding of faithful living—love. And our two readings set our call to love our neighbor in the context of conflict. In Romans, Paul addresses our Christian identity when we are—or are tempted to be—the offender. In the gospel, Jesus teaches us how to respond when we have been hurt by others. In both cases, we are called to reflect our identity as children of God through attitudes and actions of love.

The choices we make in life are often based on the identity we claim. In Holy Baptism we begin to live into our new name, “Child of God.” I am often asked, especially by people of other Christian denominations, why it is that we baptize young children when they cannot comprehend a relationship with a God they cannot see or know yet.

In our tradition, we baptize people of all ages. And when an infant is baptized, we as a community of God’s people make promises along with the parents that we will raise this child to live into their identity as children of God.

Like the young doctors-in-training who put on their white doctor coats AS IF they were already doctors, we are clothed with Christ in our baptisms. And throughout our lives we grow into our identity as a child of God, even as we stumble along the way.

Paul reminds us that we will all stumble in ways that offend others. When we hurt or accuse or judge others and cause a division, either individually or in our attitudes toward groups of people—when we are the offender—we, who are made in the image of our loving God, are called to do something about it.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another,” Paul writes. We owe it to our neighbor to love them—whether that neighbor is a family member, a friend, or people we may not know personally but have condemned in one way or another.

God gave the people of Israel the law that begins with the Ten Commandments, a few of which Paul names. God gave these laws to help us live in love toward others. They are cross-shaped commandments. The first two teach us to love God first—the One in whose image we are made. And from that identity as God’s loved children, we are sent out to love our neighbor. I often have our confirmation youth rewrite these commandments with the “shall nots” flipped to what we *shall* do. Martin Luther does that for us in his Small Catechism.

As we are loved, we live as reflections of God’s love when we love with attitudes and actions of respect and care for the well-being others.

In the gospel passage, Jesus teaches us how to respond when we have been hurt by someone else. I will say that I have heard of very hurtful ways this process in Matthew 18 has been used, so we must be careful. We engage in these steps with the intention toward reconciliation. This is not about retribution or shaming. It is not about self-justification. It is about making a way back toward a healthy and whole relationship.

This week one of my friends shared a saying on Facebook that read, “If we could look into each other’s hearts and see the challenges each of us faces I think we would treat each other with more love, kindness, compassion and patience.” What Jesus teaches us today is just that. Rather than stew in our anger and hurt, we are called to look into each other’s hearts.

The divisions we are witnessing in the world—and that we are engaging in ourselves these days—are only made worse because we are not stepping forward to look one another in the eye and truly listen. We may not know that we have hurt another person, and when that is brought to our attention it is important to listen to our neighbor’s perspective.

And when we are the one who has been wronged, we may find that we are holding onto that hurt and anger, and the other person has no idea how their actions have affected us. Healing and reconciliation can only happen when we look into each other's eyes and open ourselves to the possibility of mending that relationship.

When we enter into these kinds of conflicts, remembering that we are clothed with Christ, as Paul reminds us, we can trust that we are covered in the love of God which claimed us as loved and beloved children of God in our baptisms. We are God's people of love and mercy, because we were created in the image of our loving and merciful God.

And Jesus reminds us that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there among them. But notice, this well-known phrase does not refer to when two or three are gathered in peace and unity. As much as I know that to be true also, here Jesus promises to be with us in the midst of our conflict as we gather in his name to work toward reconciliation and peace with those we struggle to love.

We will not live this life of love and reconciliation perfectly every time we experience difficulty with our neighbors. Martin Luther helps us with that, too. One of my favorite quotes of his goes like this:

“This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.”

In Holy Baptism we were clothed with Christ. We have been named and claimed as God's holy and beloved children, created in the image of God, the source of love. This Christian life is about growing into that identity—an identity we cannot lose because God will not let us go!

As we listen next to the musical offering, let this precious gift from God, our identity as God's children, surround and fill us as we recommit ourselves to attitudes and actions of love today.

Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Drawn together in the compassion of God, we pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

A brief silence.

Unite your church, O God. Bless the cooperative work of churches in this community, especially our ecumenical partners First Presbyterian Church, St. James Episcopal Church, and the United Methodist Church as well as our local representatives of Love In the Name of Christ and the Salvation Army. Guide the work of the Lutheran World Relief and bless the offerings we gather for their work this month. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Protect your creation, O God. Teach us ways that do not harm what you have entrusted to our care. Renew and enliven places suffering from plagues of insects, fire, storms, or pollution. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Bless the nations, O God. Shape new paths toward peace and cooperation, teaching us to recognize one another as neighbors. Guide legislators, civil servants, judges, and police toward the well-being of all. Infuse the coming election season with honesty and integrity. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Tend to all in need, O God. Assist all friends and family members who are seeking restored relationships. Give community to the lonely and neighbors to the outcast. Shelter all who are vulnerable in body, mind, or spirit, especially those listed in our bulletin today. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Receive our plea, O God, for the end of the coronavirus. Comfort those afflicted with COVID-19 and uphold our medical workers. Give all people a sense of responsibility for others and provide the world a vaccine. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Sustain us in our work, O God, and give employment to those who need it. Shape societies to ensure fair treatment for all who labor. Help us to love our neighbors in and through our work. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

All these things and whatever else you see that we need, we entrust to your mercy; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**