

A sermon preached at St. George's Anglican Church Calgary, by the Rev. Clara King, September 17, 2018.

Proper 24 – Year A

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today we have two readings which are bound together by one Greek word: Peter asks, “Lord, if my *adelphos*, if my brother or sister, sins against me, how often should I forgive?” And Paul writes, “why do you pass judgement on your *adelphos*, on your brother or sister?”

Adelphos used to refer strictly to biological family, to blood brothers and sisters. It was a technical term without a lot of complex meaning behind it – until it began being used in a surprising way by the early Christian community.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record a moment early in Jesus' ministry when the message comes to him while he's teaching, “your Mother and your siblings (*adelphos*) are looking for you”, and Jesus replies, “who are my mother and my siblings?”, and looking at his followers and his disciples he says, “these are my family, my *adelphos*”.

From that moment, it seems, the word *adelphos* took on new meaning: it came to be used not only for biological brothers and sisters, but for the family that we become with one another in the Church, brothers and sisters in Christ.

So when Peter asks about his brother sinning against him, he's not asking about his biological brother – he's asking about relationships between disciples of Christ. And when Paul speaks to the Romans about how to treat their brothers and sisters, he is speaking directly about brothers and sisters in Christ.

And if we notice carefully, we'll notice this: that being brothers and sisters in Christ – even in the very early days of the Church – was complicated, challenging, and stressful... just as it so often is today.

Just like today, people found themselves as brothers and sisters with people who were very different from themselves – people who they wouldn't perhaps have chosen as brothers and sisters, if they'd had a choice.

Just like today, people found themselves as brothers and sisters with people who they perhaps did not like, or did not respect, whose theological choices were profoundly different from their own – that's what our text from Romans is about this morning.

Just like today, people found themselves stuck as brothers and sisters with people whom they'd hurt; and stuck with people who had hurt them.

So much of what Paul wrote is devoted to the question of how do we live together, now that we're brothers and sisters. There's endless challenges they faced, trying to live together as a family in Christ; endless complex circumstances that Paul had to address – and yet his answers, and Christ's answers stayed remarkably the same: we care for one another, determinedly. We pray for one another with compassion. We persevere in looking after one another.

Here at St. George's we are adelphos, brothers and sisters in Christ – and it's as complicated as ever it has been. We are remarkably different from one another; we genuinely disagree on a number of key theological topics; we perhaps wouldn't have chosen one another as brothers and sisters – heck, we wouldn't even have *known* of one another's existence – except for the Church.

And yet the answer is the same – the answer has always been the same: we are called, nevertheless, to care for one another determinedly; to pray for one another with compassion; to persevere in looking after one another.

Because when we behave with loving care towards one another, eventually our hearts will follow.

This is why we are renewing the ministry of Laying on of Hands at St. George's: so that we add to the ways we care for one another and uphold one another through the challenges we face in life. While God is always, endlessly at work in our hearts and in our lives; sometimes we need another person to place their hand gently upon our shoulder and tell us that directly. While God is endlessly ready to help us find our next step towards spiritual health and growth and new life, sometimes we need someone to look into our eyes and proclaim that truth to us.

This is what Laying on of Hands will offer; and everyone is welcome to receive it – whether you face a serious, long-term personal struggle, or if you'd like prayers for a friend or family member.

I pray that this ministry will help us grow ever more deeply into a congregation where we support and care for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, even while we're very different from one another; even while we might disagree on any number of things.

Let us deepen our bonds of affection, and care, and prayer for one another, so that we're united in Christ, so that we're strong enough to bear our differences, so that whatever may come, we can hold firm, and hold one another up, and walk together proudly and strongly and maturely, as true brothers and sisters in Christ, his Body in the world, a light for all to see.

Amen.