

September 4, 2011 Pentecost 12 Proper 18A Matthew 18:15-20

It strikes me that the Great Commandment to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves must surely have been easier to keep track of back during Jesus' time. Even if there was only one God then as there is now, surely there were a lot fewer neighbors.

On the other hand, justice and fairness were no less important. So, as Matthew tells us, the early church devised its own system of appeals to find it all the way from one-on-one person — to only a few, and then to the whole community. If all that process failed, then it was eternal damnation along with all the other sinners. Something tells me that not Jesus, but some of his confused followers came up with that damnation idea.

This Great Commandment, this summary of the law and the prophets, talks about love, but it is also about justice. Justice is the way societies and institutions and governments best love one another. Justice is the way our nation began and once again has the opportunity to show its love by embracing the stricken East Coast, for instance; remembering how deeply connected are we all.

Justice has always been the very heart of the gospel. A just peace for all people continues as the thrust of the church's ministry and the message we proclaim in the name of God. It is not only for the way we treat one another in our congregations, but it is also for the way a religious denomination learns to live together and to use its

energies in God's name and not its own. And it should be that way on and up to the highest courts in our land.

Hearing Jesus' counsel about a just society once again well serves to remind us and to encourage us to take up that call. But justice has fallen on hard times. We are so distracted; it's difficult to do anything about it. Not long ago, in a church in Texas, the religious right got considerable press claiming — actually judging, if the truth be known — that our courts are as bad and as dangerous as, if not worse, than the terrorists. A short time later, one of their patrons closed his case by recommending assassination be added to the simple and somewhat gentler appellate system just now suggested in Matthew's gospel. Talk about terrorism!

Our Declaration of Independence stated that we are interdependent with all nations and affirms the notion that we are created equal... and endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among (us), deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Further, our founders struck an international chord consistent with and resonant to the gospel understanding of human beings when they wisely devised a system of justice by balancing authority in our judicial, legislative, and executive branches. They left us this legacy surely that we might be its beneficiaries, but even more importantly, its stewards.

They certainly did not have in mind that it be hijacked by some or any religion and thus thrown into imbalance with total disregard for their wise counsel and, I might add, their understanding of the gospel and its Judaeo-Christian tradition.

But if Justice is the grammar of things, Mercy is the poetry. The Cross says something like the same thing on a scale so cosmic and so full of mystery that it is next to impossible to grasp. As it represents what in one way or another we are always doing to each other, the death of that innocent man Jesus hanging up there on that tree *convicts* us as the whole of humanity, and so it would *seem* that we deserve the grim world that over the centuries we have made for ourselves. As it also represents what one or another thing we are always doing not so much to God above us somewhere as to God *within* us everywhere. That is the justice of things.

But the Cross also represents the fact that the good is also present in the grim, and God is present even in the godless. That is why the Cross has become the symbol not of our darkest hopelessness, but of our brightest hope. That is the mercy of things. Granted who we are, perhaps we could have understood it no other way.

So long as the religious right remains wrong about justice, it will never be right about mercy. If the hurricanes are punishment about anything -- as some say they are — they are surely the consequence of our continuing lack of stewardship, not only of our environment, but, as well, of our system of checks and balances, of our social responsibilities, and of our economic inequities. A carelessness that gradually

bulldozes our relationships into what could ultimately become a class warfare beyond our wildest imagination.

Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets and what they foretold. He fulfilled it by carrying it out with justice and peace and love. We are commanded to go and do likewise, because that is our stewardship. That is the way out of Gethsemane through the Cross, back to Eden, and into the kingdom of God.