



Pentecost 14
Proper 18(A)

The Ocean and Beloved Community

[RCL]: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

The ocean is one of the most beautiful of all God's creations. If you sit at the shoreline, you can never see where the ocean ends. There is a lot to be learned from sitting and looking at the ocean; if you are present at high tide, the waves come crashing into the shoreline. That is greatly exacerbated in the midst of torrential storms like hurricanes. At high tide, the ocean seems to command your attention and invites you into a conversation. It is loud and roaring. Resistance to its natural movement can be detrimental. If you are in the water when the tide is at its peak, you will be pushed and nudged back to the shore. Conversely, at low tide, the ocean is generally calm as the waves come in quietly, softly, still majestically. There you are lulled into a moment of quiet and perhaps deep reflection.

2020 has been the year of high tide. The waves have been crashing at our shoreline for most of the year. We have been pushed into our shelters. We have found new life in visitations through our computer screens. For way too many, the waves have overtaken them, creating major loss of life due to pandemic-related illnesses. For others, the waves have crashed at the shoreline of social equality in a country that for so long has been determined to only respond during low tide.

As we wait for the return to whatever normal is, God is extending an invitation for us to respond to those things which we can change – those things over which we do have some control. We may not know when we can fully return to in-person worship nationwide or our workplaces, but we can attend to other urgent matters that are screaming for our attention.

Many folks are currently searching for a roadmap leading to becoming the Beloved Community, that vision wherein “all people may experience dignity and abundant life and see themselves and others as beloved children of God.” There is no easy path and a great deal of talking, discernment, and action are required to get to that Promised Land. There are times when conversations are difficult to have. People struggle in the most intimate interpersonal relationships to say when they have been hurt or how they have been offended. Sometimes, people just walk away without ever expressing true feelings about the pain they have suffered because of the actions of others. When the conversation does not yield the desired result the very first time, there is a tendency to shrug it off and to simply give up. The challenge is that when those

conversations are avoided, it can leave behind a toxic culture that permeates a community needlessly. We never know which incident after evading a conflict will trigger the crashing of waves once again at the shoreline.

Matthew's Gospel challenges us to become involved in tough conversations. We are called to bravely stand up for what is right and against what is wrong and to raise our voices. If needed, the roadmap provides strategies wherever conflicts develop. This particular passage is thought to be a conversation that was created by the apostle. It is highly unlikely that Jesus said these exact words because Jesus never spoke about the church or resolving conflicts in the church. This text applies to conflicts that required attention after his death. The message, however, is central to an understanding of how to stay in conversation at the most challenging times.

Many congregations within The Episcopal Church have been struggling to design programs that will lead to the world that Jesus preached about throughout his ministry. It is a daunting task; were it easy, the work would have been completed years ago. Truly, it takes a lot of sheer will and great intentionality. It also requires a willingness to both talk and listen. Neither practice is easy and yet, it is possible to get closer to the goal with every attempt.

Amid a national pandemic, we should summon up the courage to address systemic racism, look at the root causes, and find solutions that will reorder how we live together in a harmonious and loving community that celebrates the depth and breadth of our beautiful communion. The church and its leaders are perfectly poised to spearhead this mission. This is a remarkable moment in what we call the ordinary time of the church to model for the secular society what brave conversations that lead to healing look like. Jesus understood that healing involves taking some risks. Every time he dined with tax collectors and Gentiles, people were enraged. It was unseemly for him to fraternize with “the others,” they thought. Jesus continued to preach about love for one another.

People of color have been members of The Episcopal Church for hundreds of years. In many of the segregated churches, there were endless conversations about what full inclusion would look like if all church doors were open to everyone. While most doors are now opened, full inclusion is still elusive in some places.

In a year when many of the old societal norms are being challenged, the church is also tasked with confronting its own struggles for equality. For those who feel that the church has sinned against them, Matthew recommends that such sin be called out, first privately, then in increasingly public formats. We are at an inflection point where this work must be done with urgency – it can be done even at a time when in-person gatherings are conducted at a minimum. We can challenge ourselves to creatively determine how to facilitate dialogues with other congregations within our contexts and across denominations.

Truth-telling creates vulnerability and sometimes leads to confrontations, or perhaps “care-frontations,” where we act with love to continue the dialogue. We must not give up. If we are ever going to arrive at low

tide where we love our neighbors as ourselves, we must all be willing to risk pain and suffering to get there. In an earlier chapter of Matthew, Jesus bids Peter step out in faith into the rocky seas and to come to him. Although the waves were crashing, Jesus beckoned Peter. He beckons us, his contemporary disciples, to step out in faith to eradicate this awful iniquity.

The goal of becoming the Beloved Community is not relegated to one or a handful of congregations. There must be a focused and concerted effort for everyone to engage. It is clearly understood that the past cannot be undone, but the goal of studying and revisiting history is to help understand what happened and learn from those mistakes. Too often, dialogues lead to superficial work that is ultimately unsatisfying. Jesus is inviting us to dismantle this sin once and for all so that the afflicted may be healed forever.

May God nudge us all to the shore where we can find the energy to listen to each other and develop a plan that leads to lasting change. Amen.

The Rev. Kathleen Walker is the missioner for black ministries in the Diocese of North Carolina. She works from the diocesan house in downtown Raleigh. She joined the bishop's staff in 2020 to focus on the vitality of historically Black congregations by helping to weave their diversity into a closer bond of inclusion with other parishes and the diocese. The goal is to ensure all predominantly Black congregations have the best opportunity to make the fullest use of the resources of their parishes, partnerships, and the diocese. Rev. Kathy graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary in 2018 and shortly thereafter joined the clergy team at St. John's Episcopal Church in Tallahassee, Florida as associate rector for pastoral care and parish life. She is originally from South Florida and was an active layperson in that diocese prior to discerning the call to ordained ministry.