

Matthew 18:15-20
9/6/2008

An ode to one of my best friends, Delinda. I was in my Freshman year at Texas Tech University when I came to know Delinda. We were both regulars at the Canterbury Club, the Episcopal campus ministry for the University. Though Delinda was only a Senior at Lubbock High, we Episcopal Red Raiders, "Get your guns up!" adopted her as our younger sister. We formed a tight knit community, and Delinda was a perfect younger sibling. Larger than life, Delinda is a self-described gypsy and an artist with a nasty, snapping wit, which all younger siblings need. And at the time she had brightly dyed red hair and drove a small, black Porsche convertible. Behind the driver seat, her red and black matched the Texas Tech colors.

On the afternoon that I first met Delinda, I was speaking with our priest and "community organizer" Father David. An ex-hippie and non-conformist, Father David was the type of priest who... how shall I say it in pulpit appropriate terms.... put latex pregnancy deterring devices in the bathrooms of our building, a heretical move in Lubbock, Texas. This was not, so much, for the students. There was, after all, a note saying, "It is ideal to be in a committed relationship, but "dot, dot, dot", please be safe." Father David, really put said items on display more to offend other more "abstinence only" sorts of campus ministers who came to visit. On this particular afternoon, Father David and I were engaged in an important theological and doctrinal conversation about a recent article in "The Onion." Delinda trotted into David's office in a distraught fashion. She plopped down and said that she needed some help. The problem, as it turned out, was not Delinda herself, but her best friend, Jamie. "We have to do something about Jamie," she said. Delinda, I would learn, was always putting others before herself. And she told us that her best friend was sliding a slippery slope toward serious substance abuse. She was hooked on many things, including cocaine. Jamie had refused help and had moved out of her family home and into her drug-dealer/boyfriend's apartment. Jamie had cut ties with all those who really loved her, but Delinda did not give up.

Delinda spoke with love about her friend. There was no judgement about Jamie, only care and concern. She wanted to help. She did not know how. As someone who wanted to be a priest, I watched my mentor in a difficult situation. David first dealt with Delinda's pain, saying how difficult it must be to watch a friend's loving personality recede behind a mask of addiction. And we talked about a potential intervention, how we all might gather around Jamie, tell her that we love her, that she has a problem, and that she needs help. Delinda and David organized Jamie's family and friends. Delinda was determined to not let Jamie go.

Which brings me to today's Gospel reading. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus gives some sound advice about how humans might best relate to one another, especially when there is some conflict, some abuse. And that is what I would like to talk about today: Jesus, conflict, our relationships with one another, and God. And I want to do that in the context of Delinda and her intervention with Jamie. Perhaps, as we forge toward a new academic year, a new schedule here at St. A's, and a presidential election, we should take a moment, a pause, to remember how to love one another.

It would be lovely if human beings could all just “Rodney King” it and “get along”, but understanding the reality that when two or three are together, there are probably four or five opinions, and God’s peace gets passed over, Jesus offers options for dealing with more difficult realities. In today’s reading, “Jesus said, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...”

In other words, work on the model of Delinda’s intervention. When someone offends or hurts us, we talk to that person, person to person. We go to the offender, directly. We, at least at first, assume the best in the person. If he or she listens, wonderful. We have deepened our relationship and our trust of that person. If not, we try at least one more time, bringing a friend, a therapist, a spouse, a relative, or Father David and we go and talk to that person. We again, offer the possibility of reconciliation and peace. We do as Delinda did for Jamie. Tell that person we love her, tell her that she needs help, that we can help, and that she is better than this current pain. In other words, no matter how hurt, angry, upset, or in pain we feel, we are invited to ACT out of forgiveness, to offer the possibility of peace.

Now, many Christians, in our zeal for forgiveness have often thought that this means putting ourselves in dangerous situations, going back to abusers and those who cause us harm. And it is true that our faith is not one that promises to remove all hurt and pain. Our savior was killed, after all. But Jesus does not say, “Ignore the consequences of an action”. He does not say, “Forgive and forget.” It is more like, “Forgive, and move on for the best of both parties. If a relationship is possible, wonderful. If not, move on and try harder” And in fact, an important part of an intervention is saying, “if you cannot change, I cannot be there for you.” And we must sometimes also establish that boundary, even as we desire peace. But, even if we must move on, we are being told to avoid revenge and hate and to act in the best interests of all parties involved, not only our own selves but also the other person.

Another event in Jesus’ life even better addressed how we might live with one another, even when we hurt one another. At the Last Supper, Jesus gathered his disciples. It was the night before he died, and the world was swirling with fear. Judas has already betrayed Jesus. All would eventually deny and betray him. And Jesus knew it. But, knowing that he could not stop their betrayal, he offers them forgiveness even before they do wrong. He shares a meal with them. He washes their feet. He shows them that they should also wash one another’s feet. And he breaks bread with them. He shares a cup of wine with them. And he tells them that these two things are him. When we drink them, we take him into our bodies. We take his love and his peace and his forgiveness, and we let our bodies absorb them. And Jesus does this knowing what is to come. It is a pre-intervention, if you will. It is as if Delinda could tell a younger Jamie, “Someday, you might hurt yourself, but you are still welcome at the table of our friendship. And if that happens, I can help you.” It is a message in a bottle to the future.

Delinda’s actions are often some of the closest I see to God’s. And that is why I want to sing her praises. And I want to do so today, not only because of our readings, but also again because of

where we are as a community and a world. We are at the beginning of a new phase together at our church. We are in a new schedule, trying to keep our community together and be open to new possibilities. We have seen God in a new direction. And the kids are also back at school. We are sixty days away from an important election, one that decides the future of our world. Our world, like Jesus', is swamped with fear, which means that being aware of our relationships and how to manage them is especially important. And I hold up the Last Supper and Jesus' words today, and Delinda's intervention to us at this threshold moment in our lives and in this place. We are called to be together, to love one another, to help one another when we fall, and to even intervene if necessary. We are called to invite God into our relationships, trusting that God will be there, knowing that God will be there when we ask God to be. Luckily, Jamie got the help she needed. She got an education. She has a family. She is much happier... And we know that our ending will be happy too. The Last Supper shows us that no matter what, Jesus is still reaching out to us, offering us his body and blood and his peace, and showing us this new way to be together. And even if we fall, the banquet of God's peace is still open to all.