

23rd Sunday in OT Cycle A September 10, 2017

Dinah and I recently saw the movie Dunkirk, the much-acclaimed new film by director Christopher Nolan, about one of the most inspiring events in British history.

In May and June 1940, the first months of World War II, British and French forces were no match for the German war machine. The continent had fallen. Germany had penned in 400,000 Allied soldiers at Dunkirk, a village on the coast of France.

Against all odds, a flotilla of 700 small privately-owned British fishing boats, tugs, ferries and pleasure craft raced across the English Channel to assist military vessels to evacuate the troops - what became known as the "Little Ships of Dunkirk."

I won't give away any of the human drama that plays out in the film, but in part at least, this is a story of how people can come together and accomplish so much. How working together, a community is capable of so much courage, compassion and decency, despite the fear and horror around them.

Of course, we witnessed or have been reading about the heroes of Houston. The individuals and communities in Texas that have come together to help neighbors in need. As we gather now similar acts of neighbor helping neighbor – community action for the common good are happening in those places impacted or about to be impacted by Hurricane Irma.

Our readings today speak about our community of faith.

In the Gospel, taken from what is known as Matthews Discourse on the Church, Jesus explains a means of reconciling when one member of the community has sinned against another or has caused harm to the community.

And Jesus, who had earlier conferred the power to bind and loose on Peter, extends that power to the wider church.

Jesus saw in his disciples – in his Church – the Body of Christ - a community with the power to change lives, with the authority to instruct, to proclaim the truth in love, to forgive sins, a community with the power to transform the world through prayer.

We now in our time are part of that Church, a faith community, more specifically a pastorate of St Francis/St Mary/Holy Family.

What should be the primary focus of any church community?

St Paul, in our second reading, gives us the answer. He tells the Romans something remarkable, and simple, not one of his very long compound sentences that we sometimes see in his letters: Paul says, "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

There it is - Love – that must be at the center of every Christian community.

St Paul knows that to be a Christian is not to be an individual practitioner of private virtue, but a member of the Body of Christ, a member of his Church.

As a community of God's people, we owe each other love and nothing less.

The first reading from Ezekiel speaks of the obligation of the prophet to give witness to the truth, especially when it involves the conduct of those around us – members of our community. We are our brother's keeper.

We are all called in a sense to be prophets by making love of God and our neighbor, the underpinning of our everyday lives.

We must love others enough to risk our own comfort and at times our own wellbeing for the good of others and the good of the community.

We show our love for the oppressed by speaking out for them.

We show our love for the oppressor by loving them too and calling them to conversion.

That gives some context to Jesus's lesson on dealing with members of the community who harm us.

Some, when they read this part of Matthew, see the scenario as serving justice on wrongdoers. First, confront them privately. Next, bring backup witnesses to the offense. If all else fails, take it public. And if collective shaming doesn't do the trick, then turn the rascal loose and be done with him or her!

The Jesus method of conflict resolution is not about applying pressure to the situation until your opponent confesses that she did you wrong. It's based on winning back your brother or sister.

It's about restoring an intimate relationship, about bringing the community together, not wringing justice from your opponent by turning up the heat.

In all matters of conflict, we must begin and end with that love Paul says we owe each other.

So, if someone hurts us, instead of focusing on retribution for ourselves, we're motivated by love and concern for the wrongdoer. We speak to them privately.

If the wrong continues, we enlist others—not as judge and jury—but to plead more persuasively – all of this done with love and respect.

If that doesn't work, widen the circle of love, not the volume of accusation. If the injurer persists, then Jesus says treat the offender "as you would a Gentile or a tax collector." Jesus didn't say to punish, shun, or excommunicate the person.

"Gentiles, tax collectors", were the kind of folks Jesus would have dinner with!

Jesus never ceased to invite the lost, forsaken, neglected, or sinner back into the arms of God. He dares the "righteous" to throw the first stone, provided they are without sin themselves, which of course, they know they are not.

As a faith community, we take solace in those closing words we heard from Jesus today, that where two or three are gathered in my name, He will be in the midst of us.

These words bring us back to the true sense of sacred community, where we gather around Jesus, and ask him again, how we are to follow him.

Jesus makes it clear how important we are, one to another. We come together, we pray together, we work together, we stay together – in our Lord's name, bringing to focus the presence of God and unleashing the power of the Spirit – to transform our lives and the lives of all God's children.

If we do this we become much more than simply the sum of our numbers. Two becomes more than two, and three becomes more than three.

Monday/Tomorrow is September 11 – now designated as a National Day of Service and Remembrance when we remember those who lost their life in the terror attacks in PA, NY, and at the Pentagon in 2001.

We remember how our country came together after that terrible day. How united we were as a nation – as a community.

It's another opportunity to consider how to, not simply mourn, but also mend what's broken in our relationships.

If you start with love the possibilities are endless.