

Blest Be The Tie That Binds

Matthew 18:15-20

No doubt many of you have already discerned the origin of the sermon title. It comes from the first verse of the old hymn “Blest Be the Tie That Binds”:

Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love,
The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.

It is the intended closeness of those who love God and follow Christ that is the focus of our attention today. I say “intended closeness” because that is Christ’s intention for his followers. In John’s gospel we find Jesus praying “that they may all be one.” It was a prayer about all who believed in him. It is a prayer for all who believe in Christ today. It is a prayer for you and me.

Has that prayer been answered? We know that it has not. Will it ever be answered? All we can say is that it is the desire of Christ and we have not even begun to make it a reality.

The problem, of course, is sin, our rebellion against God, which yields false pride, egotism, a quest for power over others and an unwillingness to seek unity and fellowship with those who differ greatly from us.

Consider the instructions the Gospel of Matthew offers in our scripture passage for today. “If another member of the church sins against you,” we read, “go and point out the faults 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 ... If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church ...”

We will not go into what is prescribed then but basically it amounts to what some churches actually do today. They shun the offender. And it takes repentance and an apology before the body of believers from the one who has gone astray before reconciliation takes place.

It is always painful when “the fellowship of kindred minds” is no longer a reality. A certain man was in dispute with a pastor and some members of the church to which he belonged. He quit attending that fellowship and joined another. When a retired pastor asked him why he made the change, he replied, “Even before I got up on Sundays, I laid in bed dreading going to worship. I went anyway, but I left each Sunday feeling worse than I had before going. So, I found a place where I could worship and leave feeling

uplifted and happy.” That is a sad story but sadder still is the fact that such a situation is not uncommon. Rare is the church that has not known disputes that led to separations and hurt that lingers.

Yet strife within a local congregation, however agonizing it is, seems almost trivial compared to conflict between factions within various denominations. Even mentioning certain fractious issues about which Christians disagree can raise the ire of many.

Beyond those causes of arguments, there are bodies of Christians that take a holier-than-thou attitude. They believe that others are simply in error, misguided, more to be pitied than befriended. Some seem to forget the words of our Lord who said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” They forget to sing with others outside their fold: “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.”

We all should take to heart the moving words of a monk known as Brother Adrian. He wrote:

Jesus came / singing love. He lived / singing love. He died / singing love.

He rose in silence, If the song is to continue, We must do the singing.

What we must sing What is it that we must sing? Love, of course! Sing it and live it.

Intensely and sincerely.

Sometimes we stumble across a statement and have no idea who conceived it. An own author wrote these pertinent words: “The faith that finds its expression in love is all that matters.”

The brilliant psychiatrist, Dr. Karl Menninger, once said, “Love is the medicine for the sickness of the world.” Who can argue with that?

Genuine love can heal anger and meanness of spirit. True love can restore dysfunctional families to normalcy and health. Christlike love can bring about the healing of the nations of earth. God’s love can heal our spiritual sickness and bring about the healing of the Christian church so that once again those of other beliefs - or no beliefs at all - may be prompted to say, “See how the Christians love one another.”

To be sure, it sounds like wishful thinking, like the dream of a naive soul who is out of touch with reality. But we Christians have no choice but to believe in the love of God and in the duty to follow Christ’s teaching that we love one another. We must sing the song of love because that is the tune our Lord sang.

We have all heard the prophet Isaiah's words to the effect that "a little child shall lead them." Well, they often do. They cut through the excuses and the negative thoughts we offer them in answer to their questions because we think they are too naive.

Listen to a portion of a letter written by an 11-year-old girl named Kathy Isabella. She sent it to her city's newspaper and she begins by saying,

"If people wonder what is wrong with the world today, the answer is simple. On March 3rd, you had an item about a race horse dying - but paying off. You had three paragraphs about the number of races the horse had won, the amount of money won, but there was not an explanation how the horse happened to choke to death. I was glad the driver was not injured but why was there no concern for the horse? Sure, the horse is only an animal, but if we show no love to them, we probably don't bother to show any love for neighbors either. With no love in the world, it's sure to be a cold, miserable place to live."

"Out of the mouths of babes" the searing truth often comes. If we don't care for God's creation, we surely will not care for many of those made in God's image.

Where do we begin our mission to love? We begin with the Source, Christ the Savior. We begin with deep, sincere prayer, by ourselves and with other followers of the Lord. In our scripture lesson for today, we find Jesus saying, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Our power and ability to love surely comes from the Source of love, Almighty God. Where else?

Do you recall when Paul and Silas were put in jail in Philippi. They had been attacked by a mob, arrested, beaten with rods, flogged and put in an innermost cell. The jailer even fastened their feet in stocks.

What does Luke, the author of the book of Acts, tell us Paul and Silas did? They had a prayer meeting and a song fest. At midnight! And the other prisoners didn't even object. Imagine that.

Then an earthquake hit the jail. The prison was shaken, prisoners' shackles unfastened. Everyone could have escaped but they didn't.

Thinking he would be punished if the prisoners ran free, the jailer thought of committing suicide. Paul stopped him from doing so. The jailer was ready to listen to Paul's message about Christ. Before the night was over, Paul had baptized the jailer and his entire family. When morning came, the authorities set Paul and Silas free. That was an instance of amazing grace initiated by prayer.

Do you know the amazing power of prayer? It would be difficult to find a devout person

who prays often and deeply who has not seen God's power at work. Prayer reconciles enemies. Prayer breaks down barriers. Prayer fills hearts with love. Prayer promotes healing of every sort. Prayer puts a song in one's heart that no one can remove. Prayer stirs up courage and creativity so that one can perform in ways unimaginable before. "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" says the New Testament and so it is. Nothing brings such abundant blessings like prayer itself.

If you think you can't love others, prayer will enable you to do so. If you want to know the presence of Christ, join with a friend or your spouse and go to the Lord to claim his promise: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. Oh, how great is the fellowship of kindred minds!

Amen!