

# THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

SEPTEMBER 10, 2023



## LOVE

*and dealing with the sin of others*

by Drew Downs

What is it to be a source of good in the world? And also to be one who is devoted to love with a mission to help others devote themselves to love?

Religious people can be focused on the abstract, or hyper-focused on the rules of engagements, without attending to the love and to the community, as part of the same thing. To see our actions, even in helping, as manifestly loving.

It is easy to recognize that, say, offering alcohol to an alcoholic isn't the most loving. And easy enough to see an intervention, too, as loving. But formal inquiries and ostracizing people often crosses an invisible line. One that many of us know is there, but we can't really define.

To really determine the loving response, we must first interrogate what we think good is. And what our motivations truly are.

# ORDINARY TIME

2023

## WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way  
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

### Saying hard things

This week's gospel tackles one of the trickiest things for many of us. How to say something we don't want to say to someone who needs to hear it.

Some want a script. *Tell me what to say.*

Some want the courage. *Tell me that I actually can do this.*

Some want to know what's right. *Tell me I'm really supposed to say this.*

Some want rules. *Tell me when I'm supposed to say it.*

What Jesus describes, however, is the dance of relationship. It isn't just a how-to guide. It shows how delicate *and relational* our lives are.

We too often conceive of sin as individual behavior. And many of us too often see ourselves as policing the behavior of others. And some see counterculture as the nature of sin—as a fundamental damage to the community.

What we see from Jesus, however, is a sense of discretion and care, encouragement and support. And when this is met with stubbornness, we are to change the way we see them: as one we welcome rather than one we know.

This doesn't directly help us know how or when to say hard things. Just that hard things sometimes need to be said. And further, that sometimes those things aren't ready to be heard. And still further, that the source of separation isn't the sin or our talking about the sin, but that we can't get on the same page. And getting on the same page may take time. And help.

With love,  
Drew

# ORDINARY TIME

2023

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## FOR SUNDAY

*Proper 18A*

September 10, 2023

### **Collect**

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

### **Reading**

Matthew 18:15-20

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; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

# PENTECOST

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## Reflection

There was a big church in Seattle that famously imploded about ten years ago over allegations of abuse. This wasn't the sexual misconduct cases we have come to associate with the word, but the kind of emotional manipulation many in the mainline feel we are insulated from.

At the center of that abuse was how the church's leaders interpreted this passage. We might say that they took it literally. But even that is a simplification. They based their bylaws upon a desire to reprove others who sin. Claiming, of course, that they were doing this out of love.

I think of the infamous Mars Hill every time I read this passage because the problem wasn't that they saw this as necessary or that they used it as cover for abuse. What they did was to see this as their mission. That *this* was not only normal, but something they would do regularly. They wanted to do this.

*Ope! Someone's saying something we don't like, time for an inquisition!*

In recent gospel readings, we have seen Jesus share with his disciples that he is destined to die. And rise again. That their work is to carry the same burden. Not to carry a culture's outrage because they don't like how we look or behave, but because the culture doesn't know love. The mission is to bring love to the abused.

The leaders of Mars Hill were so focused on the exception, they thought it was the rule. They simply took abuse and called it love. They also thought that they were persecuted for loving Jesus and practicing his ways. Rather than recognize they had Christians within the church trying to reprove the church's sin.

In short, there *are* times when love doesn't feel loving. But a lot of people use that as loophole to launder abuse rather than acknowledge that most love does feel like love.

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