

Proper 19, Year A
Matthew 18: 21-35
Romans 14: 1-12

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California
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Making Space:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Every time my maternal grandmother would say potater or tomater, my Dad would launch into a song. It was always the same song. I imagine some of you know it. It goes like this:

You say eether and I say eyther,
You say neether and I say nyther
Eether, eyether, neether, nyther,
Let's call the whole thing off!
You like potato and I like potahto,
You like tomato and I like tomahto;
Potato, potahto, tomato, tomahto!
Let's call the whole thing off!

He was ribbing her—ribbing her about her accent. Sometimes it felt like there was an edge to the song and to his singing of it. But I think he was singing to himself as much as he was singing it to her—bringing himself around. For when he came to the end of the song, he would walk over to my grandmother, put his arm around her shoulder and sing,

But oh! if we call the whole thing off,
Then we must part.
And oh! If we ever part,
Then that might break my heart!
So, if you like pajamas and I like pajahmas,
I'll wear pajamas and give up pajahmas.
For we know we need each other,
So we better call the calling off off....

As I think about today—Welcome Back Sunday—the day we celebrate our life together as part of the Body of Christ, I'm reminded of that song and the way it functioned in our family. It always reminded us of the glue that held us together. Love and forgiveness mixed with a dash of humor. The kind of love that makes room for potato and potahto; the kind of forgiveness that calls the calling off off.

Love and forgiveness—words as common as pie. We hear them, we use them, all the time. What do they really mean? What does love look like? How does forgiveness happen?

When preachers talk about love, they often point to Paul—Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. You remember that letter, those words—"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude...." Love is surely all of those things. But

whenever I hear those words, I find myself wondering, “What do those words really mean? What do they look like in community?”

What does love look like in a community where some say tomato and others say tomahto? Where some say, “Plant ivy” and others say, “Anything but ivy.” Where some say “the way it’s always been” and others say, “let’s try something different.”

What does love look like in a communion where some hear the Gospel calling to the full inclusion of **all** of God’s children—gay and straight—in **all** of the sacraments of the church while others find such inclusion anathema?

What does love look like in the highly charged partisan world in which we now find ourselves?

Love desires the well-being of all. Love recognizes the bedrock of connectedness in God we all share. Paul points to that in his letter to the Church in Rome. He says, “Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.” Paul goes on to say, “Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.”

Love makes space for all to grow and thrive. Love seeks ways for all to live into the people God created them to be.

But that’s hard to live out in community. It’s hard to make space for someone who sees the world differently from us. It’s hard to live in a community of difference, but that’s where we live. In a community of difference. And where there is difference, there is often hurt. That’s where forgiveness comes in.

Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

I think sometimes we misunderstand this teaching about forgiveness. We get it mixed up with that old saw, “Forgive and forget.” Forgiveness is not about forgetting. Forget that! Forgiveness is not about ignoring pain or denying hurt. Forget that as well. Forgiveness is not even about pardon. Jesus is clear about that. As is Paul. Judgment and pardon belong to God. You and I—we are called only to forgive—that means acknowledging the injury, the pain, the hurt, and then letting go. Letting go in your own time at your own pace in your own way. But letting go nonetheless. Sometimes forgiveness creeps in like Carl Sandburg’s fog, softly on cat’s paws. One day you look up and find yourself forgiving. That, my friends, is God’s grace at work.

Jesus asks his disciples—Jesus asks us—to do two things: to forgive as we are forgiven and to love as we are loved. Forgiveness and love—that’s glue that holds us together. The kind of love that makes room for those who say potato and those who say potahto; the kind of forgiveness that calls off the calling off.

That song my dad sang had a way of calling our family back to a place of love and forgiveness. It became a ritual for us—a way for us to get beyond ourselves—our hurts, our grievances, our irritations, and our desire to have every member of our family be like us. After a while, any one of us would start the song. Even now, when I hear or say those words—tomato, tomahto—I find myself holding a gentler and more appreciative attitude to those with whom I differ.

You and I, we don’t sing “You like potato; I like potahto. You like tomato; I like tomahto.” We are called in a different way to return to a practice of love and forgiveness. We gather around a table. We drink the wine. We eat the bread. We become the loving and forgiving Body of Christ. In the words of Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, “Behold who you are, become what you see”—the loving and forgiving Body of Christ. Amen.