

**Pentecost 14A, Proper 18. September 6, 2020.**  
**Matthew 18:15-20. Lucy's Baptism**

I want to talk today about community and hope. Neither of them is coming very easily right now, as we all endure some level of isolation and probably even loneliness, and watch the world appear to get worse and worse each week. The world is on fire, and far more people than we expected are throwing matches and pouring gasoline. And what might normally sustain us through a dumpster fire of a public year is not available in any of its usual forms: we cannot hug, or sing together, or have that hard to describe feeling of experiencing something all together with a group of strangers and friends. I am guessing that like me, many of you are lonely and your hope, like mine, might be getting a little dry and brittle.

To be honest with you, this is why we decided to baptize our daughter Lucy today. Veteran Christopherians will know that when we have a baptism at any of our three liturgies on a Sunday, we place that baptism at the center of all of them. We can only do the baptism once, but at all three we join the baptized in renewing our Baptismal Covenant and in general make an effort to remember the promises we once made or that were once made on our behalf. When we have a baptism here at St. C's, it is the most important thing we do all day, and we all try to participate in it, whether we attend the service where the baptism happens or not. But as a family, we didn't really imagine her baptism happening outdoors, in the rain, during a pandemic, on the weekend of a civic holiday, spurning the recommended baptism days in the prayer book, with fewer friends and family able to join the church and us in celebrating. But we need right now what baptism teaches us about Christian community and Christian hope.

My favorite part of the Baptismal Rite happens at the end of the "Examination." The presider asks the candidate or the sponsors if they renounce Satan and turn to Jesus, and then the presider turns to the whole congregation and asks, "Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support this person in their life in Christ?" And we all bellow, "We will!" The Baptismal Rite assumes that we cannot do this alone. It argues that it takes all of us to make a Christian. And just as each of us is being made a Christian by a whole communion of saints, so each of us is among that communion of saints that is making others Christian. With apologies to our many introverts, when it comes to ordinary Christian faith, if we aren't in this together then we aren't in this at all.

Something like this is going on in our gospel reading today, when Jesus talks to his followers about what to do when someone sins against them. Go privately to try to resolve it, then go with a couple witnesses to try to resolve it, then take it to the whole church to try to resolve it. Too often, this passage is read only as a how-to for disciplining someone. Some of us know stories of a process like this being used in a certain kind of church to get rid of a member who doesn't conform. But these readings miss that what immediately precedes this passage is the famous story of the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine sheep to find the one who is lost. And what comes immediately after it, which we'll read next week, is Peter asking Jesus whether he has to forgive someone as many as seven times, and Jesus replies that the standard for forgiveness is

more like seventy-seven. The point of this passage isn't how to kick someone out of the community; it is that we are to go to tremendous lengths to restore someone, even someone in the wrong, to the community.

If we aren't in this together, then we aren't in this at all. But that isn't to say that it's always easy to be in it together. We all know how hard community can be. This almost foolish insistence on reconciliation, or re-remembering community, takes a depth of post-cynical hope. We don't give up hope of being reconciled with each other, because we know that God's love, stronger than death, will never give up on reconciling us to God. As a community, we are founded on an absurd, undefeatable hope, that God is bringing the world and us and our enemies to good. Christian community is only made possible by an outlandish hope. And that hope might be most concretely expressed in baptism.

Some of you know Lucy's story. She is a baby made out of hope and love, partially out of your hope and love. When she was born at twenty-four weeks gestation, we were told not to stroke her because her skin wasn't developed enough to tolerate it. If we had been allowed to hold her, she would have fit in one open palm. She had a collapsed lung, drugs in her system, a hole in her heart, and could only breathe with a ventilator and another machine that shook her lungs open to receive the air that was being pumped into her. Her lowest weight was just below a pound. We hoped against hope and when we couldn't hope any more, we borrowed hope. We borrowed some of that hope from you.

We decided to baptize her today because every baptism is an icon of the hope that makes the church alive. The absurd hope against all odds that is based on the promises of the God who raised Jesus from the grave and is always raising us up out of graves and into new life. The hope that insists that, however bad things are getting, God is at work, with us and any things we have created, nurturing and nudging and whispering as near, quiet, and consistent as breath. The hope that lets us promise to teach a baby the love of God, the hope that dares to presume that we have been adopted into the family of God, the hope that knows more deeply than anything that God will love her, as God loves us, her whole life long. We have to do this together, because who would dare make or believe these promises alone? Who could sustain this hope stronger than death by themselves? Even now, even in these days, we together have a hope deeper than the grave, a hope we can only hold together, a hope that holds us together. Amen.