

Moses of Ethiopia, called Moses the Black, was a revered monk in the early church, but he began as a leader of a band of robbers, both a thief and murderer. His impulsiveness and passionate nature led to deep spiritual struggles as he later devoted himself to Christ in the monastery. For years in times of continued temptation, he would stand up all night with his eyes open battling his demons. Yet in time those battles subsided, and he gave himself to a life of prayer in the midst of his religious community.

The story is told of the time the monks gathered to render judgment on one of their number who had sinned. As they came together, Moses arrived looking like this. He came carrying on his back a leaky basket filled with sand. He explained to his brothers that this represented his many sins hidden from his own view yet clearly visible to others. Then he observed, “And now I have come to judge my brother for a small fault.” With that reflection, all the other monks forgave the brother who had sinned against them and returned each to his own place in the monastery.

Moses lived to the age of 75 when he was warned that invaders were on their way. His reply was simple: “They who live by the sword shall die by the sword.” He and six companions simply waited and offered no resistance as they were killed. It is said that seven crowns then came down at the place where the seven of them died as witnesses to Christ. Moses was ever a witness to peace and forgiveness—in life and in death.

Today we have heard a challenging lesson from the Gospel of Matthew, the most Jewish of the gospels and perhaps the gospel with the most realistic view of the Christian community. There is a slight parallel in Luke, but overall this passage is unique. Matthew is the only place where we find the word “church.” The gospel writer speaks from a later stage in the life of the Christian community—beyond the honeymoon. There are no naïve illusions here. It is assumed that people will be people. Never mind how devoted to following Jesus, they will let one another down. They will break relationships apart when left to their own devices.

This passage follows the teaching about the shepherd who retrieves the one lost sheep. Next comes the teaching we will hear next week about forgiving seventy-seven times when our neighbor sins against us. Here Jesus is concerned not just about judgment and justice but about restoration to the life of the community and finally about forgiveness.

The early Christian community is dealing with the dilemma that has challenged people of faith through the ages. It comes face to face with the reality that we are all prisoners of our sin, all driven by self-love rather than love of God and our neighbor. It is what others came to call “original sin.” Here the sin of the offender and the sin of the offended are interwoven in the fallenness of us all.

Jesus steps into this challenge to guide us as we seek to follow him in a life of community. There is a parallel in the Talmud, but here Jesus puts the focus on the offended person’s role. The initiative for reconciliation lies with the one offended. Back in Leviticus, the logic was spelled out: “You shall not hate your brother...but you shall reprove your neighbor, lest you

bear sin because of him.” In wisdom literature, such initiative is an antidote to anger (Ecclus. 19). It is not about vengeance but restoration. It is about healing for the one who reproves the other and thus is healed of anger. It is about healing the offender who is restored to community. There is respect for the offender and for the community of the church. There is no victim mentality here but a way of living into the obligation to love our neighbor that we hear about in Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

At first, I thought this gospel lesson was a bit of a downer thrown at us as we return to the life of community in the month of September. Yet I stop to think about the custom of Judaism as it observes its new year, Rosh Hashanah, and its Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, in this season. It is a time of beginnings, and a time of beginning is right for us to set our pattern for living together as people of God. It is an appropriate time to acknowledge that people are people. We will have high hopes for our life together, but we must also commit ourselves to dealing with our shortcomings. We are bound to sin against one another, so we must commit

ourselves to dealing with broken relationships, dealing with those baskets of sand.

If people are people wherever they are, what is different then about Christian community? In a word, Christ. The Jewish forebears of Jesus had the shekinah, the glory of the divine presence. We have Jesus. They gathered for the study of Torah. We gather as followers of Jesus, seeking to know him more deeply. As he says, "...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Jesus is not limited by time or space. He is truly among us. We enter the presence of Christ by gathering in his name. That is what makes Christian community different from every other community where we find ourselves. Here is the witness we have to share with a world deeply divided by race, creed, and nation.

So let us all remember our baskets of sand--unseen by us but seen by others, leaking sand wherever we may go. May we commit ourselves to building a community centered in Christ and woven together with bonds of

respect and forgiveness. May our ears be open as Jesus continues to say,

“...where two or three are gathered together, I am in the midst of them.”