

A Reading from the Wisdom of 1 Corinthians 6:7-10

The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your siblings. Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the realm of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the realm of God.

A Reading from the Wisdom of John 19: 25-27

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Today's Reflection – "No and Yes, Part Four" Rev. Martha Daniels

Will you pray with me? Light of light, may our speaking and our hearing lead us to your wisdom. Amen.

As we continue with our No and Yes series, we have another reading from one of Paul's letters, this time to the Corinthians. Again, I'm not coming up with these ideas on my own—the research in this series is based on solid scholarship from Biblical scholars from mainstream churches and universities and seminaries. No tinfoil hats or special pleadings! And yes, there are some studies available that do some special pleading, and some texts can be read that way—and while they are interesting, I don't think they serve anyone well.

So—First Corinthians, the first letter of Paul to the church in Corinth. It's an early letter, and again Paul didn't have a formal theology here, just as in the letter to the Romans. He's giving advice, not laying down rules, and part of his distress is the divisions between the different factions in that early community in Corinth. That list doesn't really even make sense—some of

those terms are synonyms and some are not so much sinners as sinned against, and some really need a definition. Thieves, swindlers, and greedy people are pretty much the same, I think, but by Paul's own statements elsewhere in the same letter, they are eligible for redemption, so how can he say they have no place in God's realm? And of course, by today's standards, we'd want a lot more definition of "sexual immorality," not to mention "adultery," when many couples have open relationships—"violating a covenant relationship," perhaps. AND then there's the idea that "drunkards," an offensive term in itself, are choosing to be alcoholic. So, yes, the whole list is an issue. Again, I think if we look at context, it might be more productive.

Paul is trying to persuade this young Christian community to be different from the Graeco-Roman world around it. Part of his focus is on harmony and mutual support, which is laudable. But part of it too, is on control—of women—this is the famous letter with the line saying women should not speak in church—of sexuality—that apostles should not be married, but that it is better to be married than to burn, and this reading. Paul wants to not only encourage his followers to care for each other but to control how they do so. What I find interesting about this is that Jesus didn't.

Jesus said a lot, in the words we have recorded in the gospels, from several different sources, and with different goals—he said many things about how to take care of each other. About who is blessed—blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, and so on. Jesus said that the ones who fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, visited the sick and those in prison, clothed the naked and befriended the lonely—it was as if they did that to Jesus. He was all about how we were to treat each other. He didn't say anything about who can have sex with whom; or who should be married and who not. When Jesus talked about who was going to be part of God's realm, he talked about how we treated each other. Yes, he talked about marriage and divorce—but as if it were entirely irrelevant. He pretty much dismissed it. It's not about body parts, in other words—it's about heart. How do we treat each other? Paul missed the boat. Jesus was not about control—he was about loving and caring for one another.

Did he spend the last supper giving them a set of rules to follow? No—not even in the book of John, in which the last supper is followed by a long monologue, known as the Discourse, full of complicated theology. "I am the

vine, you are the branches.” “I have loved you as God loves me; remain in my love.” Jesus is portrayed as spending the last moments of his time with his disciples talking about how to love, not how to control. Not who’s in charge.

I read an article recently that said, not entirely flippantly, that Christianity has had it wrong all these years. The focus of Jesus’ ministry was not resurrection, but the table—feeding and nourishment, healing and care. The Last Supper was really the crowning moment of his ministry, not the resurrection. Think of how many times Jesus fed and healed—the loaves and fishes, all the miracles of healing—people with leprosy, raising Lazarus—all the times he ate with unexpected people—tax collectors, wealthy people, sinners, and so on. Jesus’ focus was on care, healing, and comfort, not control—of death or anything else. Something to ponder, anyway!

So Paul was trying to get those early Christians to behave differently from their neighbors—as he saw it—to be unlike them, more Godly—again, as he saw it.

In the reading from John, however, we see Jesus acting as I’ve just mentioned—healing, comforting, asking people to care for each other, this time in a very special way. “The disciple Jesus loved” is a great mystery of Biblical studies. Technically, yes, Jesus loved all the disciples, even Judas. Remember even Judas ate the bread and drank from the cup at the last supper... But one of the disciples is apparently more loved—and recognized as such. He is never named—or she, some scholars think the disciple was a woman and is gendered as a male in the gospels to avoid scandal, but it causes as much if not more scandal for the disciple to be a man, so there you go. Some scholars think John was the disciple, and that is why he never names the disciple—out of modesty or the 1st century equivalent of being in the closet. At any rate, it is clear that one of the disciples was especially beloved by Jesus, and was recognized as such by the other disciples. At the time, people ate sort of half lying down, leaning on an elbow, especially for formal dinners, which the Passover meal would have been. Generally two people shared a dining couch, friends, brothers, or business partners—because it was all men in the dining room, except for some of the servers, of course—someone you trusted shared your dining couch. So that’s the background to that bit earlier in John, when the

“beloved disciple” is described as leaning on Jesus. They were sharing a dining couch.

And then, a day later, Jesus is on the cross, and asking that beloved disciple to take care of his mother.

This is no simple friendship. I have many friends, good friends. I even have a few friends who I could call at three in the morning and say, “Help,” and they would say, “On my way, be there in a couple hours.” I even have one who would say, “I’m coming, you need to use me as your provisional attorney of record? I think my bar license is reciprocal with Illinois.” Whether I needed a lawyer or not... But I have very few to whom I could say, or who would say to me, “I’m dying. Please take care of my mother as if she were your mom.” That’s more than friendship. That’s love. That’s family; family of choice, caring for one another.

Again and again in this series of No and Yes, we have seen this. The No readings teach anger, hate and control. The Yes readings offer love, compassion, hope, and healing.

Once again, we say Yes—to love. In all God’s names, amen.