

Story and Meditation: Like a Tax Collector

September 6, 2020

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

by *Eric Anderson*

The kolea stood and watched the Pacific waves roll up on the Alaskan coastline. It had been a good summer, at least by kolea standards. There had been plenty of food, and his feathers had kept him warm when it rained. There hadn't been too much trouble with hawks and foxes. All in all, a good summer.

Now it was time to fly back to Hawai'i. But he was hesitating.

It wasn't the flight. Oh, he'd done that more than a few times by now. He was an old hand on the kolea route. It certainly wasn't the weather. The nights were getting colder in Alaska, and he was ready for some more sunshine. Besides, the caribou were moving about and one or two herds were getting close. No kolea likes to be disturbed by a bunch of giant bundles of fur with long legs and heavy hooves.

Still he hesitated, because, well...

The mynas.

Compared to an arctic fox or a herd of careless caribou, mynas were a minor nuisance. They had rarely bothered him, or rather, they'd never really offered to do him any harm. Now, they bothered him quite a lot.

My goodness, they were noisy.

They'd swoop down onto a nice grassy area filled with delicious worms and bugs, which was fine. Plenty for everybody. But the next thing you knew there'd be a myna discussion, and then a myna debate, and then a major myna argument. It didn't seem to bother the worms any, but a kolea has sensitive ears.

That's what he'd tell them. "I have sensitive ears," he'd say. They'd look at him with sympathy, then forget all about it as soon as one of them had to disagree with another.

He flew back to Hawai'i – what else could he do? – but without great enthusiasm.

He was enjoying his lunch one day when a flock of mynas settled down beside him. "Here we go," he sighed to himself. "So much for a peaceful afternoon."

Well, there was someone else nearby determined to break the peace of the afternoon, and that was a hunting cat. Whatever you may think of cats, and I know there are lots of reasons to like cats, mynas and finches and kolea are not big fans, especially when the cats are hunting. This cat was hunting.

In a moment, the alarm cries of one myna had become the alarm cries of all the mynas, including the one who was a happy and unhappy singer (remember her?). The kolea and all the birds on the ground took to the air, leaving the cat with nobody to hunt. Other birds joined in the cries and scolding, too, until the air rang with it. The frustrated cat had to move on to somewhere else with the scolds of all the birds ringing in its ears.

Breathing heavily – he was breathing harder than he remembered breathing on the flight to Hawai'i – the kolea decided that there was something to be said for mynas after all. They might be noisy beyond belief, but as neighbors went, they certainly did make a difference.

It's pretty clear that during his three years of preaching in Galilee and Judea, Jesus of Nazareth set the bar high for personal ethics, for community righteousness, and for commitment to the God of Israel. In writing his Gospel, Matthew made sure to describe Jesus' teachings in some detail right off the bat. Whereas Mark focused on accounts of Jesus' healings early in his Gospel, and Luke mixed miracles with message, Matthew opened his account of Jesus' ministry with the three chapters of the Sermon on the Mount. The virtues expounded there challenge us all: meekness, mercy, the thirst for righteousness, peacemaking, courage, purity of heart.

It's no wonder that the Apostle Paul chose to simplify it, but he didn't really make it any easier, did he? Like John Lennon, he might simply have said, "All you need is love," but love is no easy matter. I like to say that to love someone is to set their interests at or above your own. Or as Jesus said in John's Gospel: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Talk about a high bar.

This section of Matthew 18 is about what happens when we don't clear the bar.

Christine Chakoian writes in *The Christian Century*, "Loving our neighbor sounds plausible in a world where everyone sees eye to eye, agrees on what is right and wrong, and respects the same measures of fairness and equity. Loving our neighbor sounds possible when we share common values and rules of play, when we trust the neighbor's good intentions, when we respect the same measures of justice.

"It gets dicey when these presumptions are stripped away."

The Gospels record enough moments of dissension among Jesus' closest friends to make it clear why Jesus would have offered a process for resolving them. This one is kind of startling in its clarity and simplicity. If you've been wronged, you start by raising the issue with the person who hurt you. If that doesn't work, you bring along a friend or two to see if you can persuade

the offender. If that doesn't work, you gather the community that exists to help you all live righteously. If that still doesn't work, then you wash your hands of them. Simple.

Except... not so simple. As Alyce MacKenzie writes at Patheos, "I am troubled by the arrogance that never doubts that if I'm miffed with someone, they're in the wrong. The repeated visits to the 'offender' could be seen, not as loving persistence, but as harassment and bullying." Disputes between people rarely appear to be as clear-cut as one did wrong, and the other did not. Even when they are – even when someone definitely did do something wrong – it's pretty common that the offender hides it, attempts to justify it, or gaslights it (lies about it). When there's behavior from more than one party that needs critique and change, well... it gets complicated.

It is, however, a place to start. This is a process about reconciliation, and reconciliation happens when those who have been divided make the choice to repair their damaged relationship. These three simple steps invite us into a lot of hard, hard work. As Krista Tippett wrote in her book *Speaking of Faith*, "Truth can be told in an instant, forgiveness can be offered spontaneously, but reconciliation is the work of lifetimes and generations."

It's easy to miss the critical role to be played not by the person who has been harmed, but by the person who harmed them. If this process is to work, they have to participate. The steps, in fact, are steps that are required of one who has refused to participate in the previous one. Jesus began his instructions at the point where the offender has already failed to take part. It's not up to the one harmed to call someone to account. It's up to the person who has done harm to make apology and restitution.

I wish all these public figures giving us non-apologies would recognize that.

But at least this process has an end. Jesus said, "if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." To first century Jews, those were the people you avoided as best you could. They weren't necessarily sinful – well, the tax collectors were collaborators with the feared Roman occupiers, and residents of occupied nations have always seen collaborators as sinful – but contact with them could require you to perform ritual cleansings that you'd prefer to avoid.

Except... Jesus seemed to have other ideas. Jesus healed at the request of a Roman centurion and a Canaanite woman. He ate with tax collectors. He told the righteous people that the tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the realm of God before they did. One of his closest friends was a tax collector. And most of the people for whom Matthew wrote his Gospel were Gentiles.

For Jesus, for Matthew, for the early church, a tax collector and a Gentile was not someone to shun, it was someone to engage with. Relationships *begin* with people in the situation of tax collector or Gentile. That's not where they end.

Jesus' direction to his disciples was no more and no less: "Start over."

You know who figured that out? Peter. In the very next verse, Matthew 18:21, Peter asked, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?"

You remember what Jesus said, right? "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Like a tax collector. Or a myna. Or any of those other folks we've scorned and shunned. Yes, they've got a role in this. They've got some apologizing to do. If we're honest, we probably do, too. But for Jesus, the work of reconciliation does not end. There is no moment of cut 'em off and let 'em go. "Cut 'em off and let 'em go" is what you do when you're fishing. It's not discipleship.

Let them be like a Gentile or a myna or a tax collector – and begin again.

Amen.