September 6, 2026 "The Most Loving Place"

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua

Once upon a time, in a fictional town in a fictional church named Beacon Hill, a fictional man named Tim gave one of those long, labored sighs thanking God his term of what is our equivalent of Senior Warden in this fictional setting was almost over. He was counting down the days until his last leadership meeting. He was worn out. Burnt out and looking forward to fewer meetings where little was accomplished other than other church leaders airing complaints.

Then he got a letter telling him he'd fallen out love with his church and he needed to reconnect with that love and God or the church would suffer. Even though it was signed "a friend", Tim took the letter seriously and went on a little journey visiting people in the church he respected, admired, had had disagreements and even fallen out of relationship with. He asked their opinions of the letter and how he might reconnect with God. He received some good advice, some wisdom, and some rejection. He learned a lot.

Finally, he met with the pastor who had had some revelations of his own like how a beautiful building and lots of programming is not necessarily what Jesus had in mind when he mentioned the church, like in today's Gospel. The two then decided to make some changes that they hoped would help the whole church grow closer to God and each other, and help them fall back in love with the church. Time never did find out who sent him the letter that started it all, but he suspected it was of Divine origins.

This is a modern parable written by leadership gurus Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges called *The Most Loving Place in Town*. Much like Jesus' parables, it tries to engage our holy imaginations rather than offer quick fixes to problems like burn out and invites us to reconnect to the church as Jesus defined it in today's Gospel as anywhere two or three people gather in Jesus' name. Not to complain or try to force their way, but to listen for what God is saying to them about how to embody the love of God in Jesus in their time and place. That is why the religious definition of the church is the Body of Christ – the embodiment of God's love through its members – people- and given life through the Holy Spirit.

That's pretty much what Paul's letter to the church in Rome says: that the purpose of the church is to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and love their neighbors as themselves. Of course, as today's Gospel addresses, sometimes people fall short of this purpose. As in any family, church, or group of people, there can be jealousy, competition, fighting, manipulation, disagreements, even sin sometimes to the point where someone gets hurt. I've met a lot of people who share their stories of how the church – meaning people who make up the Body of Christ – have disappointed them, or done something they didn't think was right, as the reason for why they left church. I've met more people who tell me these reasons are why they choose not to be part of a church, of the Body of Christ, because it's just a bunch of selfish sinners waiting to cause harm.

That's a heavy message, especially today when we are about to baptize three people into the Body of Christ. But as heavy as the message is, it could also be an opportunity to grow and help us delight in what we are celebrating this morning. Because both can be true without one negating the other.

In just a few minutes, Isaiah will have his parents and Godparents commit him, and Chris and Josh will commit themselves not to St. Matthias, but to the entire Body of Christ. And that is good and joyful. Just like most families are happy to grow and receive new members.

We read in the Gospel and in Paul's letter to the Romans, being part of the Body of Christ is like being part of a family in that it can teach us about being fully human by discovering the best, the worst, and mundane parts of humanity. It's where we learn how to value and appreciate each other and learn how to get along, which isn't always easy. Because sometimes even in the church, there can be conflict. The

reason why we gather in the name of Jesus is to help us realize God is always with us, even in conflict, even in the difficult stuff. Often, it is the uncomfortable parts we don't want to explore where we can be surprised to find God already there waiting for us, yearning to show us something about ourselves, the church, and God. Which is how God helps us heal, grow and mature through forgiveness, humbleness, and learning being right isn't always as important as we think. Church can be where we heal, learn to love as Jesus loves, grow together and discover that bearing one another in love is not about one person getting their way, it's about hanging in there together come what may. As one preacher put it, Jesus is that glue holding us together no matter what happens.

This is where the joy in welcoming three new members into the Body of Christ comes in today. As a church, we may not be perfect, we may not have a happily ever after, we may make mistakes, and hopefully we learn from them, forgive one another, change what we can, and listen a little more to Jesus and little less to the talking heads on the news. Despite our flaws, we can celebrate that as Isaiah, Chris, and Josh become part of the church today, through their baptism, we can renew our participation in the Body of Christ. Everyone of us, no matter our age, gender, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ability, or even how many times we mess up, all of us who are here today are part of this beautiful, sometimes messy, sometimes inspiring, often hopeful, usually caring, Body of Christ where there is always room to heal, and grow through forgiveness to become as Paul encourages us to become, the Most Loving Place in Town. In a few minutes when we'll renew our baptismal covenant, stating not only what we believe but prayerfully considering how we are going to live the promises we made to love God and each other. Not only here, but everywhere we go from here.

Thank you Isaiah, Chris, and Josh, for reminding us in a world where many are quick to condemn the church, you are here today to help us fall deeper in love with God and the church by gathering together in Jesus' name to renew our hearts, minds, souls, and strength, as the church grows through you.