

# Sermons at St Paul's

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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## *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

This has been one hard month in terms of weather disasters, hasn't it? First there was Hurricane Harvey, the lazy storm that would not move, which dumped as much as 50 or 60 inches of rain over southeastern Texas and south-western Louisiana. Then there was Irma, which destroyed or wrecked most of the island habitations and electrical systems in the Lesser Antilles, British and American Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. Finally, Irma trashed Florida and the southern coastal states of this country.

Many of the areas Irma hit the hardest are islands of two kinds – the remnants of volcanic cones and the coral reef islands. The high volcanic islands have steep uplands and suffer from the torrential rains with mudslides, water shoots and coastal flooding from the storm surge. The low, coral reef islands suffer from the storm surge as well, and they have no protection from the devastating winds – in some cases, with Irma, they said, gusts over 180 mph.

How does a low-lying island like that ever survive such a blow? That is, of course, the question going on now. Has the melting of the Greenland, Arctic and Antarctic ice made it impossible for these islands to regain their ability to support human life? Here's the thing about coral islands and reefs: they are constructed over centuries by very small organisms, called coral polyps. Those little animals absorb calcium carbonate from the seawater, build fragile outside walls of calcium with it, and attach themselves to an existing coral structure. Over time, as they die, they leave their skeletons behind them. If you go down to the Florida Keys, to a town called Islamorada, you can visit the Windley Key Fossil Park and see the skeletons of fossil coral colonies. It's fascinating!

OK. What does this have to do with today's Bible readings? Well, they all have to do with community. Coral polyps live in communities, which are remarkably resilient over the centuries. What does it take to build a strong community that will survive the onslaught of disasters, the sins of family and friends, the birth and death of members? Our lessons say that for humans, forgiveness and compassion will reknit the bonds of community.

The reading from Genesis tells of Joseph, son of Isaac, who had been sold as a slave by his brothers. Now, years later, as his starving brothers present themselves to him, he says: "So have no fear, I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In Paul's letter to the Romans, he talks of tolerance for any whose habits differ from the Jewish core of Jesus-followers. In our gospel passage this morning, we hear Jesus' clear instructions about our duty to forgive those who offend us – not seven times, but seventy –seven times.

What would happen if a coral polyp did not forge its shell to the sea animal next to it? What if it refused to bond its little shell to its parents and grandparents, its sibling or the other coral polyps in its colony? There would be no Great Coral Reef off the coast of Australia. There would be no Florida Keys, or lagoons around the Pacific islands.

If Joseph had not forgiven his brothers and had compassion on them, his people would have starved, and the Israelites would have been reduced to a sad remnant of themselves. And perhaps Moses would not have been born, and perhaps he would not have led the Israelites out of Egypt. And the Passover might not have happened – you see the trajectory.

Not only does forgiveness and compassion build coral reefs, it also preserves community. And community is what has built this church, here, today. Look around. You will see the evidence of little coral skeletons everywhere. Look at the building itself. People whose names you will never know contributed all through the 1920's to build this place of worship and love. You can read the names of people who contributed to the stained glass windows. There are both a book of memorials in the back of the church near the baptismal font and plaques in the narthex (that little space where you come in) that record all the human acts that created this place.

They may have been acts of compassion, or forgiveness. They may have been acts of love or community. They may even have been acts of reparation or guilt. It does not matter. They all were acts that built this wonderful space where an assembly of the people of the Kingdom of God could happen in 2017.

Stop and think. Do you recall some gift or special ministry that someone here contributed that makes St. Paul's what it is? I can remember the names and faces of so many generous and loving people over my years here. There were people who sat in particular pews, members of the choir who sang every Sunday, faces of visitors, people who brought their children and grandchildren – especially at Christmas and Easter.

Think of our clergy, who have given us gifts that have changed us and strengthened us for service. We will say "God Speed!" to Manny next week as he becomes Rector of Christ Church in Columbia, Maryland. We will thank him for teaching us so much – including how to understand the accents of West African people being interviewed on the international news!

Every one of us here today is contributing a little bit of ourselves and our presence to making St. Paul's the place where we begin to understand Jesus' community in a world that seems dedicated to difference and division. Think about what you contribute – a smile, a hug, an extra hand for a ministry project, your presence at worship. Every one of those acts is like a little coral polyp's shell, left behind, joined one to the other, until the accumulation over 150 years has resulted in this place we call St. Paul's Church.

Look at your neighbor, the person to your left and your right, ahead and behind yourself, and thank God for that person, who is building love and compassion and forgiveness by being here this morning. And just in case you think that your presence is too small to count, let me just quote one of Manny's African proverbs (Another thing he will leave with us!)

*"If you ever think you are too small to make a difference, just spend a night with a mosquito."*

***Amen***