

Weekend of Sunday, September 6, 2020
14th Sunday after Pentecost/Year A/Lectionary 23/Proper 18
First Reading: Ezekiel 33:7-11
Second Reading: Romans 13:8-14
Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:15-20
Sermon Title: “How Much Do You Love Me? Part 1”

Theme

Jesus offers practical advice to his Disciples on how individuals—and the church as a whole—should show wrongdoers their need for repentance.

Text

Jesus said to the Disciples, ¹⁵If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Children’s Message

Sermon

This passage is known in many circles simply as Matthew 18. It is an important discipline for the church given to us by our Lord Jesus himself, and the ELCA has wisely included it in the model constitution by which all ELCA churches are to operate. Those of you who can put your hands on a copy of the Constitution of the church, check me out on this. It is Chapter 15 of the Constitution.

However, I often find that it is ignored by most members of the church. So I am going to briefly walk through it with you.

We have to go back to the beginning of chapter 18 to see who Jesus is speaking to and when we do that we read that this conversation took place between Jesus and his Disciples.

^{18:1}At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ...

So the first thing we need to know is that this is not a conversation with the general public, or the priesthood, or the Pharisees or Sadducees; or any of the other adversaries Jesus had. No, it is his Disciples, that rag-tag cadre of followers with whom Jesus will soon be giving the responsibility for nurturing his bride, the church.

The second thing I want you to notice is who this discipleship lesson is directed to. In verse 15, Jesus said:

¹⁵If another member of the church sins against you ...

Here I would like to point out that only two writers in all of scripture use the word “church.” Luke uses it generously in his writing of Acts. And Matthew uses it five times in the gospel that bears his authorship – this being the second time; the first one being the confession of Peter that we heard two weeks ago when Peter correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God and Jesus responded by saying

^{16:18}on this rock I will build my church.

So this concept of a spiritual body, an organization, and institution is just beginning to be talked about among Jesus and the Twelve. But already, in this passage Jesus said, my followers will behave differently than the rest of the population.

And how is that? I am so glad you asked. His instructions are the Gospel Reading.

¹⁵If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

This may just qualify as the most overlooked direction straight from Jesus' mouth in all of scripture. Yea, I said that. We think, we are Christians and we need to forgive and forget, and so we forgive without letting the person that offended us know that they offended us! And then we never really do forget, because we have been hurt and we don't like that, and since we never pointed out the hurt, the other person may not be aware that they hurt us, so it may in fact happen again! Not fair, said Jesus. We should go to them.

“But I don't want to hurt their feeling.” If Jesus lived in our day he would say, “Do not enable their bad behavior! If they hurt you, they will probably hurt others. Do not allow that to happen! For your sake and the rest of the fellowship, *love them* enough to stop them!”

And you know something else? Your hurt is not your offender's problem, it's your problem. They might not even be aware that they offended you! So what are you going to do with *your* problem? Are you going to sit on it and let it fester? Are you never going to speak to that person again? Are you going to talk about them behind their back to others?

A true story will illustrate this lesson. I had an incident many years ago in the little church up north where one member didn't like something I said or did and began telling people not to listen to me. He further began to stir up trouble among the fellowship and even made a scene at a congregation meeting. Now, I am not aware of a single person in the fellowship who hadn't already dismissed him as an agitator, but I had to confront him and ask him to stop his behavior. He did not make this easy either. He refused to meet with me to even discuss it, and eventually he took his membership elsewhere. And while you may think that is a terrible example of

Jesus' model, He made his bad behavior become my problem and I dealt with it according to this passage, and as a result I believe we would still consider each other friends, and I hope that he learned something about appropriate behavior in the church.

Now you might want to ask me why I would make the effort, after all, there are problem people everywhere we go. The answer is because I loved him enough as a brother in Christ, that I was not going to allow him to become lost to Christ.

Now I'm going to tell you that I have messed up a few times myself. Oh I know, hard to believe but its true! Probably more times than I know, and I can say that because, though I hope you love me enough to lovingly point out my mistakes, all churches lose members all the time and many times I, as this church's pastor, have no idea why and when I inquire, I get nothing. This church, its pastor, its members, the Christian life is apparently not worth that much to them and so they just go to some other church that they hope is less sinful, or worse yet, they just go away and become unchurched.

So let's covenant with each other right now. Love me enough to talk with me about your upset, and I promise to love you enough to do the same.

And why would we covenant to do that?

Because Jesus said in verse 15b:

^{15b}If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

Peace is restored between the two, and peace is restored within the larger community. No one has to take sides – there are no sides, except for the side of Christ, right?

But what if the offender does not listen to the one who was offended? I am so glad you asked. Jesus has an answer for us.

¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses

to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

You know, I have noticed that some people are just stubborn and won't listen to anyone. Jesus provided us with a way to pursue our case so that we might get justice, but notice it never does go to the legal system. Jesus' system keeps the dispute among the fellowship of believers. And at the end of that process, if they still don't apologize, they should be excluded from the fellowship.

I have to admit, I have never had to take a party to the end, to exclude them from the fellowship. But in that case I mentioned moments ago, I entered into the process called for by the Constitution, which is Jesus' process, and it is very disheartening. Thankfully, it never went to the end. But the point is, I handled it appropriately, even though it was difficult, and I believe I could call that man on the phone today or knock on his door and we would probably do just about anything for each other. He was in attendance at the last community service I preached at in Cortland, and we greeted each other warmly and he wished me God's blessings as I moved on. Though he is no longer a member of the Lutheran fellowship in Cortland, he is a member of another Christian church and more importantly a member of the kingdom of God.

But the process does not end there. Jesus said if the offender won't list to you, or you and a couple other members of the church, or to the whole church, then you are to treat such stubborn and obstinate people like Gentiles and tax collectors, those who were unrepentant and sinful and unclean ... and in need of hearing the Gospel more effectively!

Yea, you heard me right. Though Jesus told his Disciples to exclude them from the community of faith and treat them like Gentiles and tax collectors, weren't those the very ones Jesus sought out to demonstrate the Gospel to?

And so you see, relationship building for the sake of the Gospel never ends. There is no one outside the loving reach of the Father. God desires that all are included. And so our work at reconciliation never ends.

So here is my **Raisin the Bar Challenge** for you this week.

I know conflict is difficult especially among the fellowship of believers. But avoiding it will simply allow hurt to fester and sadly some might fall into inactivity and miss out on the many benefits of life within the fellowship.

Take this teaching of our Lord Jesus to heart. If there is a hurt that you have that just won't heal, seek out the one who hurt you and humbly tell them about it. There should be none of that in the fellowship of believers. Do you love them enough to do the work to restore the relationship?

And if you are someone who has offended another, whether you were aware of it or not, hear out that one who was offended. You probably didn't mean to hurt them, and the now that you know, you ought to apologize. Recognize that they brought the offense to your attention because they love you that much.

It is the will of our heavenly Father and our Lord Jesus Christ that at least those within the church be in loving relationships with each other.

Prayer

Loving and merciful God, your Son and our Lord went to the cross as the greatest example of love, grace, and mercy the world has ever known. Invade our proud and sinful consciences with your Holy Spirit that we will be more inclined to love and forgive each other. We pray this through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen