

Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 2023

Matthew 18:15-20

*Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

A few different things that I've done in my life have been described to me as "The best thing that you're never going to want to do again." This passage from Matthew's Gospel has been one of them, as I've tried to live into it: it's one of the the most frustrating, stressful parts of Scripture for me - and yet, also one of the most fruitful and comforting.

Jesus' words in the Gospel reading are important ones, as he lays out this procedure for addressing offenses in the church: Go talk to the person who's sinned against you, and if they ignore you, go talk again, with witnesses, and if it continues, go publicly to the church, and if the person still refuses to repent, "treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector." It's a good, solid, faithful practice. And it's a practice that's still in use: It's been adopted into the ELCA Model constitution (which also means that it's part of the constitutions of all the congregations in the ELCA, including our own) for discipline of members in a congregation: It starts with "private counsel and admonition by the pastor", then "censure and admonition by the pastor in the presence of two or three witnesses", and then escalates to "written referral of the matter ... to the vice president of the synod", and onward to there. (I have to note, with gratitude, that in the nine years that I've been a pastor, I have never had to use that process for discipline in a congregation - occasions that rise to that level of official sanction are thankfully extremely rare.)

But Jesus' words are more than just a useful guide for church governance, or for keeping newly-ordained pastors up at night worrying about "am I going to have to use the disciplinary process?"

That kind of work of reconciliation that Jesus is describing is HARD.

Let me say right up front: This passage has been used by abusers to force survivors of abuse to challenge them, adding harm upon harm to those people. That's, to say the least, not what Jesus intends with these instructions. And in our 21st Century context, there are also issues of power dynamics that might make confronting someone unsafe or unwise.

But for those who are safely able to carry out that process that Jesus describes? It's hard, and scary. Much simpler to just ignore the problem, or the person causing it, and hope it goes away, or to talk to everyone BUT the person causing the problem, or to let it simmer until it blows up, or, or, or... It's simpler in the short term, but ultimately more painful - for everyone involved, both the one who's been sinned against and the one doing the sinning - than taking the chance, showing the vulnerability, and sitting down with someone to say, "hey. We need to talk." And doing it not just once, but again and again, over and over; even when the process has been exhausted, and Jesus says "treat the person like a Gentile or a tax collector," that doesn't mean shun the person or cut them off. One of my seminary profs, talking about this passage, asked our class, "And how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?" The answer, of course, is that he sat with them, and shared meals and hospitality with them, and talked with them.

That work of reconciliation, of talking, and of listening, of working to make amends - it's hard, and painful. And in our captivity to sin, we take the easier way; in our captivity to sin, we choose the way that's simpler or feels better in the moment, even when it's the way that's ultimately going to cause more harm and more pain.

But this isn't just a model for our lives; it's not Jesus saying "you have to do this or else..." It's a model of life in the kingdom of God - this whole chapter of Matthew's Gospel starts off with his disciples asking, "Who's going to be greatest in the kingdom of God," and Jesus explaining how the Kingdom of God works. And how that kingdom of God works, how we relate to one another, is based on how God relates to us. How God relates to us, of course, is with love and care and reconciliation, just the way that Jesus describes people in the church relating with one another - because in the kingdom of God, God's love sets the pattern for our lives of faith.

That model that Jesus lays out is how we're called to treat one another: with love and care and reconciliation, not ignoring the harm we cause, but acknowledging it, and working to restore those relationships which have been broken. Because that's how God has treated us - has treated you.

God's love for you is stronger than any sin, any hurt.

When your sins draw you away from God, God's love for you is persistent, repeatedly calling you to repentance, to return to God. And when you return, God is quick to forgive.

And even when you pull further away from God, God will keep seeking after you, keep drawing you back to repentance and forgiveness and God's love. My seminary professor's reminder about "How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?" is very reassuring when you're the one being treated that way.

God's love for you is a love that gave us Jesus, for our sakes; God's love for you, made known in Jesus' life and death and resurrection, has brought you reconciliation with God, and has forgiven your sins and brought you to new life in the Kingdom of God. And, living in that Kingdom of God, having been reconciled to God through God's love, we get to share in that hard, uncomfortable, but hope-filled, caring, and loving, work of reconciliation with one another, just as God has shared it with us.

Amen.