

15th Sunday after Pentecost September 10, 2023

Matthew 18:15-20

For the last three months, we have been pondering what it means to be a community that follows Jesus. What does being the Body of Christ in the world look like?

We learned we are equipped and called by Jesus to do what he did. To heal and cure. To proclaim and cleanse. We learned God in Jesus has given us the right questions to ask as we follow him. Like, what does it mean to love that person as God in Jesus loves me? We learned we are to spread the seed of the Word of God's love for the world in Jesus to everyone we meet, at all times and in places. To not get distracted by trying to root out what we think God doesn't want, but to stay focused on proclaiming the Word. Trusting God to do the rest.

We learned that when we do these things, God's Spirit will do mighty works. Because the reign of heaven is like a small thing that works without being seen and then does wonderful things. It clings to and transforms everything it comes in contact with. Including us.

We learned that we need this community of believers that is the church, for it is here that Jesus brings us- a place of messy,

idiosyncratic, ordinary, wonderful people to help us on our journey.

And we know that sometimes there is conflict in this community. So, what does Jesus have to say about that? Do we just ignore conflict and hope it will go away? Do we just cut it out- thrust the "troublemakers" away? Leave the community? What does Jesus say to do?

The text from Matthew is held up as the gold standard for how to deal with problems within a community of faith, but I think it also points to how we ought to live out our relationships in the world.

While the process is clear. The inciting incident is not. "If another member of the church sins against you." The "against you" is a textual variant. Some ancient texts have it and some don't. If it is about approaching someone who is sinning/going astray (like the one sheep of the 99) then you could leave it out. If it is about how many times we ought to forgive another person who has harmed us, then you would leave it in.

I like the fact that it is ambiguous because it makes clear that as followers of Jesus our focus is always to maintain relationship with people, whether they sin against us or are leading a life that is contrary to who God is calling them to be.

What is the process, then, when there is conflict? Very simply, the process is to deal with it. At the source. If you have a conflict with someone, go directly to them about it. Don't tell you group of friends about how bad they are. Don't post on TikTok and moan about it. Go to that person and point out the fault with a convincing argument. If they hear and accept it- you have regained them. The relationship is restored. Thanks be to God!

If they don't hear, take one or two others with you the next time. This provides both witnesses for what goes on, but also can provide support or context for the encounter. If they still don't listen, get the whole church together. If they still don't listen, "let that one be to you like a Gentile or tax collector."

Now, in Jewish circles, these people would be considered outside the group. But is that how Jesus considers them? No! Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. He healed a Gentile woman's child. I believe what this means is that while the immediate relationship with this one is different, there is still a relationship- there is just a need to re-evangelize them.

I think the core idea here is that for the Christian community- we strive always to be in relationship. Even amid conflict. As Thomas Long in his commentary on Matthew says, "relationships are precious and have enduring value in the church. When they

are broken, it is worth going back over and over to work on reconciliation. We give up on no one.”

The church, when we are at our best, does not ghost anyone. We don't cut anyone off. We never give up on them.

Any relationship will have conflict. From small (how you fold the towels, where to eat) to large (about LGBTQIA people, politics). As the church, we address conflict with an understanding that it is both an individual thing and a communal thing. How a beef between two people can affect the whole community. You've seen that in your family, at work, at school. Or vice versa- just watch Romeo and Juliet to see that dynamic at play.

God's desire is that not even one is lost. So, we are servants of reconciliation. We always strive to be in relationship- even with those who have sinned (against us). This is the core of what Jesus calls us to when he says love your neighbor in the same way I have loved you. The beginning of love is to be in relationship with them.

Also, that part of love of neighbor is to care enough to say something to them when they hurt you. To say something to them when they are harming themselves or others. To speak the truth in love to them. The purpose is not punishment-

retribution- but repentance- change in thinking and action.
Restoration of relationship.

We speak these words to them not because we are holier than thou, but from an understanding that we too are sinners and hoping others will keep us on the straight and narrow. I know I need it!

One author noted that sin is not what destroys a person. Rather, it is the inability to see/acknowledge that sin. When we cannot "hear" what another person is saying in love to us.

Those most mired in sin attack others instead of facing their own failures. So, spiritual growth requires the acknowledgment of our own sin and our own need to grow. Thomas Long says, "If we cannot make that acknowledgment, we have no option except to attempt to eradicate the evidence of our imperfection."

This Body of Christ that has been St. John Lutheran Church for 167 years is certainly aware of our imperfection. But when we are at our best, we acknowledge where we fall short, and strive to better follow Jesus. We love and respect one another enough to go to each other when we have a beef. To speak our truth to one another in love. To hear each other out. To do the hard work of making it right.

We do this not because it is easy, but because it is right. Because it leads to life fuller and more abundant for all of us. Because this is what God in Jesus Christ does for us- never gives up on us. Is always reaching out a hand of invitation to us- come, follow me!