

The 13th Sunday after Pentecost
9/10/2017 Proper 18 A
Matthew 18:15-20

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Jesus said: “If 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. But 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. If 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. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

So now let me see: “if another person of the church sins against you; ... tell it to the church ...”

Ok, as I call YOUR name come forward and stand here at the rail ... I’ve got some things to say to the church about you.

Just kidding.

Now that is pretty uncomfortable is it not?

I was raised in a church tradition that practiced the part of this Gospel which states: “If 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.”

They called this part the shunning of someone. Basically they would cease to have any dealings with that person – not only in church but also in the public world.

It was not a pretty thing. And I am pretty confident that it never achieved repentance in the person shunned. Instead, it achieved a great deal of bitterness from that person.

Even as a child, I could see the embarrassment and shame that person would have to endure.

By the time of Matthew’s gospel of the life and times of Jesus was being put down into written words, (between the years 80 & 90 CE), the developing new church was already experiencing many problems that the church has from time to time – the difficulties of trying to live together as men and women who are forgiven sinners – yet still broken – yet still troubled –

yet often insensitive – who bore really one important thing together – that they and we are forgiven sinners, forgiven by God!

I once chaired a Vestry Retreat on the subject of church growth and how Good Shepherd has managed to grow our church so well.

After a 6 hour day of examples of how we did our growth strategy(ies) and discovering what they as a church had to offer as a church community:

I believed that they could really grow their church.

They lived in a growing community within a 3 county area of nearly 40,000 people many of whom are unchurched or at least de-churched (that is people who as children or teenagers went to church, but as adults have drifted away from participating in the Christian community).

They have a well taken care of facility with extra rooms for new Sunday school classes and offices and youth rooms and music/choir practice rooms and bell choir rooms, all unused, but ready to be used.

So at the end of the day I asked “What keeps you from growing as a church?”

They answered almost to a person at the same time – “conflict,” “our church is has conflict between some of our members and the rector – our church is at war with itself.”

**Now of course most of you automatically thought, “I wonder what that rector did?”
You jumped right to that conclusion,**

They allowed that one of the Vestry members (not there of course) was spreading false rumors about the rector and the rector’s behaviors. “What can we do about that?” they asked.

“Well, you can’t kill him” was my answer, only ½ joking. “But why do you not confront that person. Go directly to that person and demand an accounting – you are charged with the well-being of the parish – how can you let this person get away with that untruth?”

I’ll bet none of them ever ran for Vestry again.

When someone new visited their church, the tension and conflict was the first thing they sensed and will not stay even though they had great possibilities.

And this is just one of the effects when Christians cannot live together in harmony.

It is very true today that the behavior of us church members on this very issue makes Christianity to the outside world repulsive rather than attractive.

It isn't a matter that Christians are perfect and will not have conflicts. There will always be quarrels, differences of opinion, disappointments with preachers and councils and Vestries, hurt feelings, bent pride, loss of face, and lots of mistakes.

It's the idea that Christians can resolve these conflicts as no other fellowship can, that Jesus puts before us today.

That can happen in the Christian proclamation of the gospel. We spend a lot of time in our pulpits talking about how Christians are admonished by Jesus Christ to love their enemies and to pray for their enemies.

When in actuality, right there in the pew side by side are Christians who hold grudges, hang on to petty hurts, refuse to forgive and love each other within the fellowship.

And when they do this, church and Christianity and the whole practice of religion for them is not the joyful experience it ought to be. They miss a large dimension of belonging to God's family.

People who follow Christ can deal with each other differently. Being aware of our own shortcomings and still having God's forgiveness, we can deal with each other in a compassionate way allowing forgiveness. Knowing we also make mistakes, we can allow others the same privilege.

Emery Parks told this story: "When the books of a certain doctor were examined after his death, it was found that a number of accounts were crossed out with a note: 'Forgiven - too poor to pay.'

But the physician's wife decided that these accounts must be paid, and proceeded to sue for the money. The judge asked one question: 'is this your husband's handwriting?' When she replied that it was, he said: 'Then there is no tribunal in the land that can obtain this money when he has written the word Forgiven.' "

That word forgive is a wonderful word to those us receiving forgiveness but to those who are asked to forgive it is a much hard task to enact.

{ When former president Bill Clinton met Nelson Mandela for the first time, he had a question on his mind: "When you were released from prison, Mr. Mandela," the former President said, "I woke my daughter at three o'clock in the morning. I wanted her to see this historic event."

Then President Clinton zeroed in on his question: "As you marched from the cellblock across the yard to the gate of the prison, the camera focused in on your face. I have never seen such anger, and even hatred, in any man as was expressed on your face at that time. That's not the Nelson Mandela I know today," said Clinton. "What was that about?"

Mandela answered, "I'm surprised that you saw that, and I regret that the cameras caught my anger. As I walked across the courtyard that day I thought to myself, 'They've taken everything from you that matters. Your cause is dead. Your family is gone. Your friends have been killed. Now they're releasing you, but there's nothing left for you out there.' And I hated them for what they had taken from me. Then, I sensed an inner voice saying to me, 'Nelson! For twenty-seven years you were their prisoner, but you were always a free man! Don't allow them to make you into a free man, only to turn you into their prisoner!'"

You can never be free to be a whole person if you are unable to forgive.}

[King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com]

Such is the value and power of forgiving someone.

It sounds as if Jesus is asking us to forgive, to go the distance.

And so am I.