

Pentecost 14A September 06 2020  
Matthew 18:15-20  
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth  
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*"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."*  
Let's pray:

Our Gospel text for today, where Jesus gives us instruction on how to deal with someone who has sinned against us, is sometimes called the excommunication or church discipline text. If someone sins against you Jesus says to go to them directly and if that doesn't work take a couple of others with you to talk about the real harm the person has done and if they're still recalcitrant then let the church know and if they still refuse to repent and reconcile, then treat them as an outsider.

"Excommunication" is a fancy church word for kicking someone out. Strictly speaking, it means officially excluding someone from participation in the sacraments and services of a congregation.

So, there's more than one reason why this passage makes me uneasy.

For instance, I've heard so many stories of people who've been cut off from some churches because they're either divorced, struggle with identity or sexuality issues, or have committed some apparently unforgivable transgression. They've been shunned or denied communion.

Sadly, there are those in our own church who have weaponized this text with an expressed desire 'for the church to act against congregations which are doing things outside the decision of the Synod... In an extreme situation, congregations could face exclusion from the community/LCANZ (Pastors Conferences, Conventions of Synod) and lose financial and resourcing support.' In case you're unsure what this is about, it pertains to the 'ordination of both men and women.' [1]

And I've heard stories about how, when wielded with precision, this text has been used as a tool to eviscerate people and the ones they love, while some smug Christian stands over them believing they've "spoken the truth in love".

This text gives makes me uneasy because Jesus is talking about how to treat someone who has sinned against you, but it gets abused instead to alienate someone who doesn't measure up to some imaginary standard; there's a difference.

This text makes me uneasy because I wish Jesus had said, "If someone has sinned against you, then gossip about them to a few other people before posting a thinly veiled comment about it on Facebook." But he didn't, so now I have to think about all the times in my life that I've chosen to draw others into a drama about someone else rather than just going to that person privately.

This text makes me uneasy because Jesus is giving instructions for what to do if someone in the church sins against you, whereas I can imagine some people using this as an excuse for not taking responsibility for their own feelings. I believe it's really about when someone does actual harm to you, not just hurts your feelings by insulting your favourite indulgence and you confront them about how hurt you are.

This text makes me uneasy because frankly, I just don't trust us not to stuff it up. I have a hard time trusting myself, my own selfishness and emotional hang-ups enough to get this right.

These things that make me uneasy bog me down. I spin my wheels and go nowhere.

But I don't like getting bogged down with such things, so after prevaricating long enough on what makes me uneasy about this text, I dug deep searching for the promises.

And there is a promise in Matthew 18, but to hear it we have to read the three verses that precede our text for today.

*"If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost."* Next verse:

*"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."*

This text is about Christ promising to be present in reconciliation because that's simply God's nature.

Typical! You can always leave it to humans to take something Jesus teaches about reconciliation and his presence in forgiveness, and use it instead to judge and exclude others.

Yet, it's precisely in the midst of our failures that the good news lives.

No matter how much Jesus' words have been twisted, no matter how badly this text has been used against us or by us against other people, God's promise can't be annulled. The promise is that God desires to be reconciled

to us and we to each other, and that when we seek reconciliation, Christ is present. The good news is: No matter how badly we stuff things up, pigheadedness is never powerful enough to invalidate the promise that God can bind together that which our sin has ripped apart.

Think about it; if the church getting things wrong and hurting people and not living up to the Gospel could destroy the Gospel, it would have been destroyed long before it was handed to us to have our turn at messing it up.

We Christians have done our darnedest to kill the Gospel, and yet, here it still is. The Church of Jesus Christ has survived papal corruption, the crusades, the enlightenment, sectarianism, and Colgate-smile televangelists. And it will survive us too. The power of the death and resurrection of Jesus can't be neutralised by the church's inability to live up to the promise of abundant life.

God's ability to make things right is always more powerful than our ability to get things wrong. If I believed more in the church than I did in God's ability to redeem our failures, I would've shot through a long time ago.

I know you people love this church. Many of you have been here for a very long time and your families call St Peter's their spiritual home. You love the place and as we've seen recently, miss it terribly when you're forced into exile from it. I too, love serving you here, but there's something else you need to hear me say: This church will let you down. I will say or do something stupid or someone else will hurt you and we will fail to meet your expectations. But I also want you to hear this: If you leave because we let you down, you'll miss the way that the subversive, gorgeous, shimmering grace of God comes in and repairs the cracks of our brokenness. And that is just too beautiful to miss.

So please don't put your trust in this church. Don't put your trust in your ability to be a good Christian. And definitely don't put your trust in me.

Put your trust in God's ability to be unhindered by our messes. Put your trust in Jesus who faithfully keeps showing up despite us. Put your trust in

Jesus, who says where two or more people who get things wrong, where two or more people who don't bother to sign up for jobs or give money to the church, where two or more people who gossip about each other are gathered, I am there.

Jesus is here. That's the promise. He is here with a power that is not our own. He is here with the power of the One who gave up heaven and life for us. He is here with the power of reconciliation for people who don't deserve it. He is here in bread and wine, water and word, you and the person sitting next to you. He is here again loving his broken church into something beautiful.

Put your trust in Jesus. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding and misunderstanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

---

[1] Rev John Henderson, *Report to the LCA NZ on a special meeting of the General Church Board and the College of Bishops on the division within the LCA NZ over the ordination of women and men*, August 2020, p.6.

---