

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18)
St. Matthew 18:1-20

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Gospel lesson for this Sunday combines things that one would normally not expect mixed together. There's talk of who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and faith like a child combined with temptations to sin, and the joy over the return of a lost sheep. Then, there's Church Discipline—including excommunication—mixed with the authority of the Apostles and the promise of Jesus that the heavenly Father will answer your prayers, mixed with the wonderful promise of Jesus to be present with His people when they gather in His name. It is a wonderful combination of command and promise, of instructions and authority.

Essentially, these 20 verses deal with your life as a Christian, especially in relation to one another.

- Who's the greatest in the kingdom? The one who has humility and faith like a child.
- Oh, and speaking of children, you best not cause them to sin—lead them into sin—for it would be better for you to be weighed down and tossed into the ocean.
- Speaking of sin, if any of your bodily members cause you to sin, best get rid of it, be it your hand or foot or even an eye, and enter into eternal life maimed and blind than to burn in hell fully intact; of course, your hand or foot or eye do not cause you to sin, but your heart—that sinful heart. As Jesus said, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person." (Matthew 15:19-20a)
- There is much rejoicing in heaven over a sinner who repents, and there ought to be the same in the Church on earth, because it is the will of the Father that none who are His should perish.

In other words, your life as a Christian on earth is to be humbly faithful to God, repentant and forgiven, and rejoicing with those who, like you, are humbly faithful, repentant and forgiven.

The difficulty lies in those times when your brother or sister sins against you. That's why many preachers and theologians, myself included, like to give a quick synopsis of verses 1 through 14, and focus on verses 15 and following. There, Jesus gives precise instructions on how to handle this situation, because, like it or not, believe it or not, you will each have moments when someone for whom Christ died and trusts in His promises as you do does you wrong. When that happens, what's a believer to do?

Well, most will want to ignore the situation. It's much easier to refuse to do what Jesus instructs here. It's seen as unloving to confront another, or such confrontation is seen as uncomfortable. So, it's just easier to let it go, let tempers simmer down over time, and just move past it like nothing ever happened. I mean, more often than not, these infractions are simple personal matters, and Jesus was only suggesting the course of action, right?

Um, no, He wasn't.

Jesus didn't say, "When your brother sins you might want to consider going to him." He said, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." This is not advice. It is how Christians are to deal with each other. If your brother or sister sins against you, you are to love him in Christ so much that you cannot just let him wander on in sin. You see, a sin against a brother or sister in Christ is an offense to God; I mean, Jesus wouldn't have gone through all this trouble in giving this instruction if it wasn't—maybe He would have just made it a suggestion, but He didn't. So, when you are sinned against, go to your brother, as Jesus instructed, and tell him his fault—privately! Go and reprove them!

To reprove someone is to tell them that what they are doing or did is wrong. It doesn't mean to harangue. It doesn't mean to brow-beat. It doesn't include any kind of threat. It means to tell them

that they have sinned. A brother is a fellow Christian, and, as a Christian, realizing that you have sinned should be all that you need to turn away from sin and repent. So Jesus said, "If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." If he actually hears that what he is doing is sin, he will repent and you have won your brother back from sin and death and into eternal life. And you live again together in peace and harmony, just as you have in Christ with the Father in heaven. And that, dear hearers, is the whole point, which is why, as I have already said, reproving doesn't mean to harangue or brow-beat.

And as I stressed, this is a private thing. You reprove him in private. I can confess my guilt and acknowledge my sin better to my good friend alone than I could in front of a crowd. It is even more effective if, when I have sinned against you, you come to me privately, rather than talk about my sin with your friends over a card game, or even talk with me about it openly at the store. I am more likely to accept correction privately than when I am shamed in front of others, or I have heard that others are talking about me. Unfortunately, it's far easier to put this process into reverse—telling others, and maybe never telling the one person who can repent and put it all right.

That's not to say there isn't a time for public rebuke and reproving, as Paul recounts when he publicly rebuked Peter in the second chapter of his letter to the Galatians. Public rebuke has its time and purposes, as when a sin is overtly committed and known, and not a private matter. Matthew 18:15-20 is about the private matter, at least, that's how it starts. So, Jesus instructs, first, to rebuke the erring brother privately.

If your brother repents, you have won, and the well-being of your brother is the prize. That's how Jesus wants you to do it.

Of course, if he or she does not listen—they refuse to see their sin as sin, or they refuse to repent—you don't just wash our hands of them. You keep trying. This is not just a set of rules to obey; this is how you love one another. Jesus doesn't want to lose them. He died that they, too, might live. He came to seek and to save them no less than anyone else. This procedure, if you will, is an act of love for the welfare of the erring brother or sister.

So, if he refuses to listen, you ought take the issue back to him again and again and again—with others along, when and if it comes to that, to help you encourage and to serve as witnesses, first if they saw the infraction, but also as witnesses that the proper reproof was offered, sincerely and in accord with both the Word of God and the spirit of love that you should have for others. With help, you again earnestly entreat your brother to turn from their sin, and endeavor to show sin as the deadly thing that it is. This still should remain a private matter, among the four or five of you, unless...I'll get to that in a bit. Again, if your brother listens, we have rescued and won him back. The four or five of you rejoice together, and the matter is put to rest; no one else needs to know about it.

But rarely there comes the difficult part—the even more difficult part—the part where your brother continually refuses to acknowledge sin as sin or, knowing that it is sin, refuses to repent. Then, and only then, do you make a completely public issue out of it, bringing the issue to the church. One small note here, is that the church really only deals in this manner with manifest sins—sins that are openly committed, publicly known, and actively denied. If you are dealing with a sin of a brother that no one else knows of—you are required by God to make sure no one else learns of it from you, which is a difficult thing to balance in regard to the instructions in today's Gospel.

Having said that, when you bring the issue to the church, it has gotten to the point where it is a manifest sin, properly speaking, through no action of your own. The entire congregation, acting through the pastor and the elders and the voters, calls the brother to repentance, and warns him that if he does not repent, the road he is walking leads to hell, and failing repentance, he will be excluded from the fellowship of the body of Christ. The purpose is to lead the brother to see how precarious his situation is, and how serious the need to repent and turn from sin is, and to win back the brother.

Nevertheless, if he refuses to see and refuses to repent, Jesus instructed to let him be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector. Now the Gentile was hated and ignored. Tax collectors were seen as the lowest form of human life—they were traitors to their people, and serving the enemy, they even abused their fellow Jews by collecting too much and getting rich in the process.

For some reason, as mentioned, it is still so easy to put the process in reverse. Putting the process in reverse means neglecting the process altogether. I mean, from time to time, one may go to the brother, but if it suits one's purposes and pride better, he'll find other ways to put the brother in his place. One may even go so far as to legislate and pass convention resolutions or proceed with civil litigation in order to enforce a peace. These methods have no or little basis in Scripture—they would be peace by way of the law, not the gospel which brings about true and everlasting peace.

Jesus' instruction was to do these things in order to win the brother. However, mixing in the ways of the world with the Word of God, you can often find yourself stuck between the Word and the world—finding that you have done what Jesus says, and nothing ever happens. The question then rises, "What do you do next?" The answer is to continue in God's Word: pray, praise, and give thanks while continuing to go to your brother; pray, praise, and give thanks while acknowledging that you have done what Jesus says—and in both cases, continue to repent of *your* sins and receive absolution all the while knowing that God will work repentance and forgiveness for your brother in His own time, if at all.

Jesus tells you to do these things because it is His power that you exercise, not your own. It is His church of which you and your brother are members. He commands, and if you are faithful, you obey—always in love, with humility, and always for the good of your brother. It's called Church Discipline, and the root word here is "disciple." It seems so hard and harsh to so many—they think of it as "kicking someone out" when in fact it is loving and faithful, and the Church is really and simply making a painful truth painfully clear—for the one who lives in sin and refuses to repent has chosen the world instead of Jesus Christ and has actually withdrawn from the body of Christ already, if only in thought and word. Excommunication just makes it formal in the hope that this final, abrupt, and offensive preaching of the Law may wake someone up to the enormity of their sin and their danger, and call them finally to repentance. To do this is loving and faithful to the Lord God. To fail to do it is to love oneself more than one's brother, and more than the Lord Jesus, and to be utterly unfaithful to this command. It is His church, after all.

"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." A couple of chapters ago, heard two weeks ago, Jesus gave the keys to Peter. Here's the point where Jesus used the plural you, speaking to all of the disciples and to the entirety of the church. Jesus stated that it is His own authority that He gives to Church Discipline. He is saying that as the Church declares a man outside of the body of Christ, so he shall be and remain until he sets that excommunication right by repentance and absolution. And then, when his sin is loosed from him by the church, it is just as valid and certain as if Christ Himself had done it (because He has). Until the church, who removed him, welcomes him back, simply going to another congregation and feeling Christian is a pious fraud (sadly, this is the way it so easily goes these days). He is excluded from the kingdom of God by God's own Word and authority. You know this as the Office of the Keys, which Jesus also sets forth in John 20, on the night following His Resurrection.

Now, so far, you might be wondering, "What is the good news here? This sounds pretty dark and dismal." The good news, of course, is hidden in the phrase, "Hears you." That phrase contains repentance and, therefore, forgiveness. Recall earlier, when Jesus said, "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." Without forgiveness, everyone would perish. But God the Father would not have it so. Furthermore, Jesus has already died, horribly, so that all might have life. He hung on the cross for the sins of the world so that you would have forgiveness and life and salvation.

And because of that, your sins have been paid for. You have been redeemed. You receive His

righteousness and with it, all that He has won for you—forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Then Jesus promises to hear your prayers and answer them—and He bases His promise on the promise that where two or three have gathered together in His name, He is there in their midst. What a wonderful promise! He promises to be present with you whenever you gather together in His name, as His people. He is present here today—yes, in His Word and in the Holy Sacrament, but He is present also as He was present in that upper room, though not in such a manifest form; still, present to bless you and to cheer you.

That is why the Church prays together as She gathers for worship. Jesus has promised that prayers will be answered, and they will be answered because He is here, present right here, right now. Of course, the form of the promise troubles some. Jesus said, “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.” It sounds like any two of you should be able to pray for rain and force God to send rain, but then, how do you explain dry spells and droughts? The promise tends to be misread.

The promise is that whatever you pray together for will be granted, but what you didn’t hear in this text are the words, “according to Your will, O God.” Jesus adds that in various places through John 14, 15, and 16. Furthermore, He said as much as He taught His disciples how to pray: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:10) All of your petitions are prayed and requested to be done according to God’s will, in the name of Jesus. For, when you do, God always grants your prayer, for He always acts in accordance with His will—His good and gracious will. Sometimes, according to God’s will, the answer to prayers and petitions is “No” or “Not yet.”

Although the strands of this text seem to be separate and not well related to one another, they connect quite nicely around Jesus. It is His church, and therefore you as a part of it deal with one another and with sin His way. His power and authority are given to the Church so that Her members deal with one another in love, and that means with discipline when needed. And because it is His Church, and you are His people, He promises His presence for you.

These strands are connected, for when the Church—and you as members of Her—acts on His behalf, and in His name, you have His authority—even to shut the gates of heaven—or open them again. He stands present with you as you speak His Word and act according to His will and command, to hear your prayer for erring brothers, and to receive them back into His grace when they repent. He stands with you because you are His church. His power, His presence, His Church...what wonderful good news! And it all comes down to this: you are forgiven for all of your sins!

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.