

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

25th Sunday of Quarantine (26th Overall)

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Ezekiel 33:7-11

Psalms 119:33-40

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

09/06/2020

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 15“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. 16But 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. 17If 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. 18Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19Again, 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. 20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

### **Conflict**

Good Morning! Have you ever known someone that, although you're forced to be around each other, you don't really get along? When I was at Camp Luther I had just such a person. We'll call him... John Doe. Now, John was in a leadership position at the camp, and after he made some decisions that most of the camp disagreed with during my final year as a camper, I was back the following year as a counselor. He wasn't very high on my list of people I wanted to be around. But guess what happens when you're in the middle of nowhere and surrounded by a finite amount of people: you are forced to work with and be around people whose company you don't enjoy. Such was the case with John Doe. A funny thing happened. We ended up spending a long afternoon together for an event at the camp and we got along. Even more than that, we joked together, shared stories together and laughed. I had used distance to create a character of John Doe. That distance meant that I was not around him to interact. It was easy to forget that he was a human being, with dreams, desires, and motivations all apart from my own. We were both imperfect, and in that afternoon I learned that a part of being a community is reconciling with one another.

This is exactly what the Gospel of Matthew is focused upon in our text today. How does a community negotiate the many challenges that come with living together in a way that reflects God's call in our lives as Christians? This section of Matthew has become the foundation of conflict management for Christian churches everywhere, St. Paul's included. And

what's more, Jesus isn't reinventing the wheel here, everything he says is based on the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> This short 5 verses is full of little details that have a profound impact on how Christians interact with one another. That is the focus of these verses, how we manage our own disagreements. As a friend once said, if you want to see the real side of a person, watch how they treat their family. The same is true for the Christian community. While it is important to be loving towards all, it can definitely say something about a person or congregation when they cannot even treat their brothers and sisters in Christ with respect.

Another important part of the lesson today is that the focus isn't on proving who was right and who was wrong. Douglas R.A. Hare points out that the writer of the Gospel “... *therefore carefully frames this passage with the parables of the lost sheep and the unforgiving debtor, both of which dramatize the conviction that God's desire is that the sinner be saved, not condemned.*”<sup>2</sup> Another scholar agrees, writing that “*The goal of such procedures was twofold: to make the sinner objectify and ‘own’ his sin at every stage, and to recall the sinner to full community by recognizing and repenting of his sin.*”<sup>3</sup>

This can be especially challenging for us in the Western church. We like our privacy. “Keep your nose out of our business!” we'll say. Once again, Dr. Hare puts it best, “*This paragraph is difficult for modern*

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<sup>1</sup> Harrington, Daniel J. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 269.

<sup>2</sup> Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> Harrington, Daniel J. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 271.

*Christians, because it deals forthrightly with the effect of unrepented sin on a congregation. We are inclined to ‘forgive’ sins in advance of repentance rather than have to confront the guilty party.”*<sup>4</sup> The pattern that Jesus lays out for us today forces us to own our mistakes, to deal with them in the context of the community.

And here is what I think is the most fascinating detail of the story today: While the text we have before us translates verse 15 as: *“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”* All three commentaries that I consulted point out that the words “against you” are not in our oldest manuscripts! (<sup>5</sup> and<sup>6</sup> and<sup>7</sup>) That’s right, this text invites us to stick our nose into the business of our community! So the old phrase “stay out of my business” doesn’t work in the context of a Christian community! What hurts one hurts us all. One of the things that I always try to make clear in both weddings and baptisms is that the responsibility falls on all those who are gathered. Yesterday when I baptized my niece Natalie I pointed this out to all those present via Zoom. The Christian doesn’t simply say “well that’s none of my business!” because when another is hurting and suffering the WHOLE body of Christ suffers too.

We end our lesson today with a piece of scripture that is usually heard in regards to prayer: *“19Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth*

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<sup>4</sup> Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 214.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 213.

<sup>6</sup> Harrington, Daniel J. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 268.

<sup>7</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 279.

*about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*  
*20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among*  
*them.”* A better translation for verse 19 might read: “*Again I say to you that*  
*if two of you agree about any case on earth... it will be done for them by*  
*my Father in heaven.*”<sup>8</sup> The point is that in the midst of disagreement,  
 when the parties reconcile, the reconciliation is witnessed and reflected by  
 God. Likewise, verse 20 is a reminder that when we are fighting, or  
 disagreeing, we must remember that Jesus Christ is present, that the truth  
 is known by God, and so it becomes a way of keeping us honest and faithful.

Being a part of any community is tough, but it is especially hard when  
 it comes to Christian congregations where matters of faith can become  
 involved. My pastor growing up used to always say this: “We can disagree  
 without being disagreeable.” It isn’t just a matter of how we treat one  
 another when things are going well, but how we treat one another in  
 conflict. But as Jesus reminds us, “*For where two or three are gathered in*  
*my name, I am there among them.*” Well thanks be to God for that. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Harrington, Daniel J. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 268.