

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Ezekiel 33:7-11

Psalm 119:33-40

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

09/10/2023

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! Today's text is a harder one. It makes us uncomfortable when we are forced to think about conflict and problems within a Christian community. We rightly think "We should be better than this!" But the reality that so many churches forget is that when we say that we are a Christian, we are first and foremost admitting that we are sinners. It's the reason why so many of our congregations choose to start off worship with a public confession. Did you know that the Lutheran Church almost had three sacraments? Martin Luther considered confession so important that he almost included it. In the ELW (Evangelical Book of Worship), the red book in front of you, we still have a rite for individual confession, although no-one has ever taken me up on it. But while confession and forgiveness are essential pieces of the Christian life, our text today deals with sin in a community when someone is unwilling to admit that sin.

One scholar writes *"This paragraph is difficult for modern Christians, because it deals forthrightly with the effect of unreported sin on a congregation. We are inclined to 'forgive' sins in advance of repentance rather than have to confront the guilty parties."*¹ That sounds about right, doesn't it? But this passage forms the foundation of every congregation in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and most likely any church that you could step inside. If you have a problem with anyone, pastor, secretary, the person sitting next to you at coffee hour, this is the model that we follow.

While this confrontation can be challenging, it helps us in a few ways. The first is that it clearly outlines the steps that should be taken. But it also forces us to be honest with ourselves, if something is really bothering us, we need to be willing to take steps to resolve it. It also protects both parties, the

¹ Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 213.

potential unrepentant sinner, and the sibling in Christ that is bringing the issue. There should be no gossip or “triangulation” if you’re familiar with that counseling term, in the community. But all of this doesn’t take away from the difficulty this text invites. It is especially hard for those who either avoid conflict or who lean toward the more introverted personality spectrum. It’s also a hard lesson because it forces us to own up to the fact that our community will get it wrong. I remember when I visited St. Paul’s for an interview and asked honestly how conflict and disagreement would be handled. The answers were vague and rosy, and I DISTINCTLY remember sharing a look with our secretary Sue at that moment as we both realized people seemed unwilling to realize that conflict and disagreement WOULD happen.

So, as we look forward to how Christ’s words form and challenge us, let’s unpack a few things we might not know about today’s text. It was originally written for dealing with serious and unrepentant sin within a congregation. This doesn’t mean that it isn’t helpful for us as we live together in community, but it helps one to understand why Jesus seems to come down so hard. My favorite Gospel of Matthew commentary by Douglas R.A. Hare writes that *“Interpretation of the disciplinary procedure must begin with the conclusion. A [sibling in Christ] who refused to listen to the church, that is, to accept the church’s rebuke and acknowledge the sin, must be ostracized; that person no longer belongs to the fellowship.”*² This is hard for us to rationalize with the “God loves everyone” message we are so familiar with, but the text forces us to come to grips with the reality that sometimes a person may be unwilling and unable to truly admit the

² Ibid.

fault. And in the eyes of Jesus and the early church, that person can only cause more damage by staying.

Another difficulty for modern readers is the way that the text sees sin as a communal issue. Hare sums it up perfectly, writing “*what I do with my life is my business; it’s no concern of yours!*”³ Sounds familiar to me! But we think so much from an individual standpoint that we forget that communal nature of sin. What’s funny is that Jesus isn’t saying anything radical or new. The first guideline is borrowed from Leviticus 19:17, and the instruction on bringing one or two witnesses is from Deuteronomy 19:15.⁴ One detail that I find really fascinating is that in the oldest manuscripts verse 15 reads simply “If another member of the church sins, go and point out the fault...” At some point later the phrase “against you” was added.⁵ This hits even harder against our individual understanding of sin and self! In fact, the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, is only used twice in the Gospel of Matthew⁶, and it’s used here in verse 17 to drive home the communal nature of believers.

We often adopt the end of this passage, verse 20, and apply it to prayer or times of fellowship. But Hare points out that it really serves as comfort and encouragement for the parties in disagreement. “*When two alienated Christians, with or without a mediator, come together to work toward a reconciliation despite all the anger and hurt that separates them, they are humbled and strengthened by the awareness that Christ is*

³ Ibid.

⁴ Harrington, Daniel J. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 269.

⁵ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 279.

⁶ Harrington, Daniel J. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 269.

in their midst... If the Christian fellowship is to survive the strains imposed by human failure, it will be only because the risen Lord sustains it.”⁷

So, what do we do? Well I’m glad you asked. Because leave it to St. Paul in Romans to give us exactly what we need to hear:

“⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. ¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ...”⁸ Amen.

⁷ Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 215.

⁸ Romans 13:8-14 NRSV