

September 06, 2020 Sermon
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

“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.” This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are **alone**.” So much for turning the other cheek, I guess. A couple things stood out to me as I was doing some reading in preparation for this sermon. The *first* thing I saw was a statement from Professor Michael Chan, Asst. Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary. He said, “As we point a finger, do we open a door?” I will leave that one for all to ponder. The second thing I read was by theologian, Audrey West, who said, “Wherever two or more are gathered, it can be *really hard* to get along.”

Ms. West’s statement couldn’t be *more* appropriate than it is *right* now. There is, to put it mildly, a *lot* of unrest in the world, right now, today. Problems stem from those who have something to say who think no one is listening to them and those who have something to say, and TRULY, NO ONE is listening to them. And, on the other hand, those who have something to say should *also* take time to listen to the *other* side. It boils down to stating your case, being heard, and allowing the other side to state *their* case, and *listen* to *them*.

I should *also* add here, that it's possible that we should take some time to discern FULLY, how it is we think we may have been *harmed* by another and what *they* had to say. More than once, we are told to put ourselves in another's shoes, so before approaching someone you think has "*wronged*" you, take time to think through what they may have been going through in their *own* life, before you decide you should approach them with your grievance.

At first glance, this seems like a nifty little three step process of resolving conflict. Step one: go to the person and point out their fault against you. Step two: If you are *not* listened to, then go get two or three of your buddies to be witnesses. Step three: If that doesn't work, then simply go tell the whole church and see if the offender *listens* to *them*, and if *that* doesn't work, well then, *they're* just like the *Gentiles* and the *tax* collectors...but WAIT!!! Jesus *hangs out* with Gentiles and tax collectors and all kinds of other people. Is this a loophole of some kind? (Something else for you to ponder)

Perhaps we should give some thought to what the offender is *saying* before this conflict is brought to the entire church. Maybe this whole scripture lesson is meant to teach us that we should *listen* and *learn* from one another because you know...where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, Christ is *there*. God in Christ hears our words and knows our thoughts. And *again*, it can also be really hard to get along, as was mentioned earlier. We all bring different thoughts and ideas to the table.

It's so easy, isn't it, for us to see the ways *we've* been harmed rather than to recognize our *own* actions and how harmful THEY can be? My children would come home from school and say to me, "So and so did this and so and so did that," but the minute I asked them what *they* did to provoke it, the conversation gradually faded away. Not always, but most of the time.

It all boils down to how we *want* to be treated, right? That whole commandment that's mentioned in Paul's letter to the Romans, today? The one that says "Love your neighbor as yourself." And Paul goes on to say, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

But truly, if you are to follow what is told in Matthew, then remember to be *kind* as you are speaking to the one you feel has *offended* you. The whole idea of speaking to them in *private* is that you will not embarrass them, or shame them in front of another person. *Honor* them, by speaking the truth in love, and in the spirit of saving a relationship, as well as the Christian community.

Adding a couple people to the group, to return to the offender, is NOT meant to back the offender into a corner, but *rather* to hear and be able to corroborate what was said by both parties. It's *not* a case of who has the bigger army, nor is it meant to *intimidate* anyone, but it is *always* a good idea to have more than two sets of ears present when a party is at odds with one another. This is, after all, about working with conflict within the Christian community.

Take care when you're presenting your truths to the one who offends you. There is as *much* harm in being full-on confrontational as there is in what you *believe* was hurtful to YOU in the first place. Members of the Christian community are God's family and are *responsible* to and *for* one another.

This scripture is not meant to be taken as a lesson on *punishment*, but a lesson in hearing, listening, and coming to a reconciliation of the minds. The definition of hearing is: the faculty of perceiving sounds. The definition of listening is: taking notice of and *acting* on what someone says. We may *always* hear, but we may not *always* listen, and that is, sometimes, the problem. And when trying to reconcile a situation, there needs to be *listening* on the part of *both* parties.

Funny, and maybe not, how this piece of scripture follows the one about the lost sheep. The shepherd has counted only ninety-nine because one is missing, and the shepherd goes after that sheep because it matters as much as the rest of the flock mean to the shepherd. There is joy in finding and returning the one in the flock that has gone astray. The scripture *following* today's lesson is the parable of the unforgiving debtor which *showcases* the need for forgiveness.

"Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them," says Jesus. Maybe Jesus is saying to us that it's not about *quantity*, but about *quality*.

It is up to us, as *followers* of Christ to get along with one another, *to forgive*, to allow *healing* to begin, and that, no matter *how* big or small the congregation, we are all part of God's kingdom...a kingdom that should be prayerfully seeking to do God's will. If, in fact, we do this, then *God* will respond, and we will be capable of living a life of *loving* one another.

In last week's sermon, I talked about those who would stay out of church because they feel like their lives aren't good enough to be in the building, worshiping with others. And I reminded everyone that churches aren't for the perfect people.

None of us are perfect. When we walk in the doors of the church on Sunday mornings, or when we pull up a live-stream video of worship, or even when we download a sermon to read, we're doing it as *broken* people, *in need* of love and forgiveness. We are *in need* of the love that's given to the one sheep that was lost. We are *in need* of being heard and reconciling with one another. We are *in need* of that unconditional love and mercy that only God in Christ can offer us.

We are the church. **We** make mistakes. **We** say things that are sometimes hurtful to others. We want to be on what WE think is the side of right, but in trying to achieve that, we step on some toes. We want the world to be a safe and peaceful place, but in order to do that, we need to step up and say things that aren't always what others want to hear.

We get angry and we shout because we think that's the only way we will be heard, but that's not the case. God in Christ *hears* us. God in Christ *walks* with us through *each* and *every* day of our lives, through the *hurt* and the *brokenness* and the *need* to be heard. And We. Are. Heard.

As people of the church, let us be good and kind and loving to one another. Let us prayerfully listen to one another and reconcile with one another, knowing that where two or three are gathered in the name of Christ, there *he* is, also. "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Amen.