

King of Glory Lutheran Church  
September 5/6, 2020  
Year A: 13<sup>th</sup> Weekend after Pentecost: Matthew 18:15-20  
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***Matthew 18:15-20***

*<sup>15</sup> “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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”*

I love mysteries. One of my very favorite things to do is read a great mystery. I love trying to figure out what is really going on, who is lying and who is telling the truth and of course, if there has been a crime committed, who did it.

When I read or listen to stories from the Bible I often have the same questions. What is really going on? Who are these people really? And sometimes, who did it?

We stumble into the middle of a story today in our gospel reading. Jesus is talking to his disciples and gives them a step by step method to handle conflict.

Chapter 18 in the gospel of Matthew begins with the disciples asking Jesus “who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

What does Jesus say to this? Well I’ll tell you what he doesn’t do. He doesn’t line the disciples up and rank them as they want him to do. Doesn’t say which one is his favorite.

Instead he calls a child over and says to his disciples that they need to be like a child and they need to be humble. Jesus goes on to say that the disciples must welcome children, those who are vulnerable, those you might not think are important, and care for them. The message? Everyone is important in God’s kingdom.

When we come to verse 15, which is where our gospel reading begins today, Jesus starts talking about conflict. And when Jesus talks about something it is because there is something going on that needs to be addressed. But what that is exactly is a mystery.

Without giving us the whole story of what is going on, Jesus gives a lesson today on the need to communicate and address conflict. Now maybe there was a major disagreement about what to have for lunch. Or more seriously, maybe one of the disciples gave another disciple a black eye. Maybe someone took something that belonged to someone else. We don't know what happened. But something did happen and Jesus lays out the path forward.

Jesus says that when someone sins against you, you should go to them and try to work it out. And if that doesn't work you should take a couple of people with you and try again. And if that doesn't work take the whole church with you. And if that doesn't work, treat that person as a Gentile or a tax collector.

Now sin is a loaded word, heavy with pain, anxiety, even guilt. And it is the place where we begin today. "If another member of the church sins against you..." here's what you do.

The definition of sin (according to the dictionary) is: an act, a thought, or behavior that goes against the law or teachings of a particular religion, especially when the person who commits it is aware of this.

Narrowly defined, sin means breaking a law, God's law. But as Christians we know that sin is bigger than one action or thought. Sin is brokenness. Sin is a tearing apart or a breaking of our relationship with God or with one another. When we hurt others, when we act selfishly, when we take more than our share, when we turn away from God's ways, we hurt our relationship with God and we hurt each other and ourselves.

We know sin. We know it in our lives and in our community. We hurt each other. We break relationships, hearts, trust. Sometimes on purpose, sometimes unintentionally. Whether we admit it or hide it, sin, in all its forms, is present in us and in our community.

When we look to God's ways we see again and again how we are called to live and how we too often miss the mark.

Take the 10 Commandments, the rules God gave us to follow and to be a guide for our lives and our community together. We want things that don't belong to us, we hurt people with our judgments, we bow to many other gods before remembering the one true God. The law shows us all the ways we are broken. When we look to God's ways we see our sin, our brokenness, and our need for help and forgiveness.

A good friend of mine from seminary (the school pastors go to before they are pastors) used to always listen to me when I would vent about someone I was angry with. She would listen and then she would say, "8<sup>th</sup> Commandment." And more often than not I would glare at her and walk away. That's because "8<sup>th</sup> Commandment" was her shorthand way of saying "see your neighbor in the best light."

For those of you counting off which commandment is the 8<sup>th</sup>, I'll help you out. The 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment is "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Martin Luther writes in his small catechism that this means, "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."

When my friend said "8<sup>th</sup> Commandment" she was gently reminding me that I should not assume the worst about someone but consider why they might have said or done the thing they did. We all need friends like that and we need to be friends like that. Friends that listen and then ask us to look deeper and love better. As Christians this is part of our life together. We need to encourage one another to be honest, to be humble and to listen.

Raging about the wrong done to you feels good but addressing the real conflict and seeing another person as a child of God takes a lot more work. Jesus knew this well and that's why he asks us today to work hard in our life together.

The good news for us this day as we examine our own sin and brokenness is that Jesus came to us to fulfill the law with love. Jesus, this day, invites us to show him our brokenness, our broken lives, broken hearts, broken promises, broken relationships. He invites us to be honest and humble with him because he loves us.

Too often we try to hide our brokenness, hoping that know one will see it. But it is our brokenness that we have in common. There are divisions right now in our families, our communities, our country and our world. Divisions and differences that seem impossible to mend.

You can name them now I'm sure. Arguments about money, about work, school, relationships, politics, science, racism, sexism, classism, the environment, religion...I could go on and on. Brokenness we think that will not ever be mended.

But is in our very brokenness that Jesus grabs hold of us and brings us out of sin by a love so great, it pours through God's laws and our lives, revealing to us God's intention for us to be healed and whole, no longer broken, no longer estranged. And this love not only has the power to heal and restore us, it is a way of life and forgiveness we are called to practice and share with each other.

When we hear Jesus telling us how we are to treat the one who sins against us, we hear a familiar echo. Jesus is showing us the great lengths that love calls us to. Jesus who will go to any length to find us, heal us, and reconcile us to God. Jesus who knows our sin and yet comes to us again and again with love and forgiveness. Jesus does not give up on anyone, and he will never give up on you.

Jesus makes the impossible possible. Listen again to what he says. "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 what Christian community is. When we gather together, in person or remotely, Jesus wants us to know who we are and what kind of community we are called to be. A community that works hard at listening, seeing and understanding one another.

Pastor David Lose shared this week important questions we need to ask ourselves as the church. What kind of community are we going to be? Will we be the kind of community that really listens to one another and speaks honestly and openly? Will we recognize that even when we disagree with each other we are all loved by Jesus? Will we nurture relationships and seek reconciliation and healing?

Friends in Christ, this is not easy work we are called to. But Jesus has given us the power to come together to learn from one another, to face conflict, to heal what has been broken. And he says when we are together in this work, he is there with us. He will never give up on us and we should not give up on one another.

No matter how much I like a good mystery, Jesus isn't really a mystery today, not for us. Jesus loves you and knows you and forgives you. The question is, how will you live today knowing that love and forgiveness in your life? Amen.