

Proper 18A, 2014 Sermon

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said, "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."

[Most of what I will share with you today comes from David Lose^{1,2} and John Shea³. I use many direct quotes.]

Professor David Lose says that our Gospel passage today has never been one he particularly likes. One reason is that he has seen it abused too many times by Christians who are “more than eager to go and point out the fault of someone who has sinned,”¹ or to shun someone who is backsliding. Nothing like using the words of Jesus to justify your own ego-need to prove *you* are right and the *other* person is wrong!

But if we approach our Gospel passage asking ourselves “What is God trying to say to me in this passage?” rather than “How can I use this passage to my own advantage?”, I think the point of our Gospel lesson becomes quite clear: Jesus is deeply concerned about relationships within the community of faith, within the church – and especially reconciliation within a community in which there is brokenness. That reconciliation and restoration, accomplished in most part through forgiveness, is the main theme of the whole 18th Chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, of which today’s passage is a part. So we must read today’s Gospel in the larger context of reconciling relationships in the community, the church; and at the heart of that reconciliation is the courage to forgive and ask for forgiveness.

“[W]hen I... read [today’s Gospel] passage carefully,” Professor Lose writes, “I realize that Matthew’s deep concern in this passage, and in so many other places, is *community* -- honest-to-goodness, authentic Christian community. And the two things I’ve discovered time and again about community is 1) we all say we want it, and 2) we usually have no idea how difficult it is to come by.”¹

“Community, after all,” Dr. Lose continues, “is one of those feel-good words that draw us into idealisms -- we imagine something out of [the old television sitcom] *Cheers*, a place where you’re accepted for who you are, where you’re never lonely, and where, of course, everyone knows your name. But the really *difficult* thing about community is that it’s made up of people! And people -- not you and

me, of course, but *most* people -- can be difficult, challenging, selfish, and unreliable. Which means that usually when we're daydreaming about community we're often prompted to do so because we don't particularly like the people -- that is, the community! -- we're currently a part of."¹

"The reason forgiveness is so important," Dr. Lose notes, "... is simple: we screw up."² For any number of reasons, be it out of a sense of insecurity, lack of awareness, misunderstanding, whatever, we screw up. Sometimes even when we are trying our best to say or do what we *think* is what God would want, we end up inadvertently hurting someone, and causing some degree of disaffection in our community. Jesus tells us in our Gospel that reconciling the community is of *fundamental* importance. Jesus' instructions to the nascent church in today's Gospel are *not* about **correcting** someone who has done something wrong; they are about *restoring right relationship* in community.

Now, "there [isn't a single person here today] who hasn't been hurt in some way recently, and who hasn't also hurt someone else. That's just life in this world. We screw up. Which means that forgiveness is perhaps the essential ingredient in our relationships at home, work, school, church, and all the rest..."²

"Authentic community is hard to come by," Professor Lose writes. "It's work. But it's worth it. Because when you *find* it..., it's like experiencing the reality of God's communal fellowship and existence in your midst."¹ Like experiencing the reality of God's communal fellowship and existence in your midst. Said in another way, it's like participating in the community shared by the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Community life is Trinitarian life.

Episcopal priest and author Cynthia Bourgeault notes that when we talk about the Trinity, we tend to focus on the static *identities* of the three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Noting that some of her fellow women adamantly argue that the Holy Spirit is the *feminine* member of the Trinity, Bourgeault humorously notes that even if this is so, women *still* lose, for it's still Two against One in the Trinity! Bourgeault says that she doesn't really care **what** the Persons of the Trinity are called; what is important is the *relationship between* the Persons of the Trinity.⁴ And if this is true for our Trinitarian God, it is also true for us, who are created in the image of God. The most important thing is not our individual persons, but the relationship *between* persons. God is a loving community of Persons, and so are we, when we are true to God. There is a continual outpouring and receiving of love between the Persons of the Holy Trinity. And it is into this Divine Flow that Jesus invites us. God's forgiveness is constantly being poured **into** us, but unless we are open to allowing it to flow *through* us into others, the flow of forgiveness is stopped. "Forgive us our trespasses **AS** we forgive those who trespass against us," we pray. We are forgiven **as** we forgive others -- *in the process of* our forgiving others.

Knowing that we all hurt one another with regularity, and that there is **more** than enough blame to go around, why is it so hard to forgive and to take the steps necessary to reconcile – steps like those Jesus outlines in our Gospel? Fr. John Shea says that in part, it is because we haven't developed the skills. He tells of a time that he referred a young married couple to a psychologist friend for counseling. After meeting with them, the psychologist told Fr. Shea, "They don't have the background to make it. They have never learned to work through conflicts. Walking away is what they know best."³ Is walking away what **we** know best? Or do we give community the fundamental importance Jesus gives it, having the courage to do what it takes to restore Trinitarian community among us? Our society does a **great** job of teaching factual knowledge in our schools, but we do *not* do such a great job teaching the social and psychological skills needed to work through conflicts. On the contrary, as David Lose points out, "we live in a culture of digital dehumanization, where we can accuse or complain about someone else at the safe distance of the comments to a post, trash someone's reputation via social media, or share difficult news via an email rather than through face-to-face conversation. In each case, we have failed to take seriously the humanity of the person with whom we are in relationship."²

"There is also a question of courage," Fr. Shea correctly notes. "Confronting another person's behavior is never easy. In fact, often the **first** step [that Jesus prescribes in today's Gospel] is *skipped*: the one-to-one encounter. We *immediately* move to [self-justifying arguments played out in our ego minds; or we resort to] 'higher-ups' in the hope of having the offender chastised. Often we seek *punishment first* because reconciliation demands mental and emotional abilities we do not have... In general, we are more skilled in justification than in self-examination..."³

And yet self-examination, repentance, and forgiveness is at the heart of our Christian tradition, which we should be practicing on a regular basis. "What is often helpful in the reconciliation process," Fr. Shea writes, "is for both parties to have a history of repentance. If confession and change are part of our self-image [and practice], we engage conflictual situations with more flexibility. Our egos bend more easily."³ St. Francis prayed that God give him at least one humiliation a day, to train him in letting his ego go. Prayer practices which train us in letting our ego be humbled can equip us for reconciliation.

Courage to "talk to someone you feel is in the wrong without judging them, putting them down, or taking responsibility for their actions"³ can come from the deep well of our spirits, our relationship with God in Christ, in Trinitarian life. Our spiritual resources also help us to have the "guts to listen when someone else tries to do the same thing for [us]... [T]he key is to put being in relationship above being right, and to take incredibly seriously how much God wants us all to be in good relationships with each other and with God."¹

“So what kind of community do we want [within] our congregation -- largely social, somewhat superficial (which is, of course, safe)? Do we want something more meaningful or intimate (which is riskier and harder)? Do we want a place that can both encourage us and hold us accountable? Are we looking for a place we can be honest about our hopes and fears, dreams and anxieties? Do we want somewhere we can just blend in, or are we looking for a place we can really make a difference?”² And what are we each willing to give, to forgive, to risk, in order to further the growth of such a community among us?

I invite you to ponder and pray about those questions this coming week. For in praying, we get in touch with the Spirit of God which lives within us (1 Cor. 3:16). And at the deep level of our spirits, Fr. Shea reminds us, “all things are in communion with God and with one another. The problem is that our psychological and social lives are often not in sync with this deeper level of communion. On the visible and more easily observed level, there is alienation and separation. But the good news is that this alienation and separation is always being pressured by the underlying communion to conform to, and to reflect, this deeper spiritual truth... A married couple [once told Fr. Shea], ‘It is like we have a rubber band around us. We can run from each other only so far before the rubber band beings to pull us back.’”³ Or we might think of that fundamental Trinitarian pattern deep in our soul, in our DNA, as like a magnet. The closer to that magnet we allow the mess of iron filings which is our lives to come, the more our lives align with the Divine polarity, that magnetic force field which is Trinitarian love. God is this magnetic force field within and among us, this rubber band drawing us back into community with Him and one another. Our task “is to sense this divine pull and surrender to its pressure.”³

AMEN

¹ David Lose: “What Kind of Community Will We Be?”, Sunday, August 28, 2011, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1601>

² David Lose, “...in the Meantime” Blog: “**Pentecost 14 A: The Essential Ingredient**”

³ John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven: The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christians Preachers and Teachers*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, pp. 267-271

⁴ As quoted by Richard Rohr in his audiobook, *Eager to Love*.