

MOSJ Talk 8/30/2011 Matthew 18:15-20
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15 “If your brother* sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.

16 If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’

17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.

18 Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

19 Again, [amen,] I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.

20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

Matthew 18:15-20 begins with an all too likely hypothetical situation: "**If your brother sins against you....**," which is followed by a second hypothetical, "**If your brother refuses to listen...**" which bears the not-purely-hypothetical truth to all of us who have brothers. If you have a brother (or sister) he (or she) will sin against you sooner or later; this is the nature of brothers (and/or sisters).

There's a reason Jesus uses "your brother" instead of "another member of the church" or some other way - Thinking of the sinner here as a brother, or sister, or close companion brings the need for resolution to an immediacy, a sense of importance that may be lost in thinking only generally of another "member of the church. But it should also be noted that the community is in play, the word "church" does follow in verse 17, and the tensions and trials which arise from the sins we commit against one another do have an impact not just on individual relationships, but on the community as a whole. At stake in this issue of sin, confrontation, repentance and forgiveness is the presence of God and what it means for us.

Frederick Buechner in his book "Wishful Thinking" says that "**The power of sin is centrifugal. When at work in a human life, it tends to push everything out toward the periphery. Bits and pieces go flying off until only the core is left. Eventually bits and pieces of the core itself go flying off until in the end nothing at all is left. "The wages of sin is death" is Paul's way of saying the same thing**".

We can see how important it is, then, to find a resolution as quickly as possible, thus Jesus' instruction to begin with the one with whom we have the conflict.

The flow of the passage is important to make note of, as there is movement from the individual to the communal. Where there is sin, Jesus says, confront it directly, one-to-one, face-to-face. If this does not solve the problem, include someone else in the conversation, and if all else fails take it to the community as a whole. From individual confrontation to communal attention, the movement of the passage is a progression that follows the development of the conflict from its origins in individual matters to its conclusion at the community level. At each point along the way sin has implications for everyone involved. That's why Jesus stressed the importance of dealing with these conflicts beginning at their core.

But there is something subtly different here. Jesus is not instructing us to bring witnesses to testify against our "brother" who has sinned against us, but to testify to the exchange between brother and sister. This is not just about safety in numbers. The health and welfare of the community are vital parts of the problem of sin between two of the community's individual parts. At each point along the way, from the start as two individuals are together to the inclusion of witnesses and supporter to the involvement of the assembly as a whole, there is something at stake.

Back, now, to the real presence of Christ. Following his teaching on the progression of the confrontation of sin in an attempt to reconcile, Jesus teaches that any sinner so committed to their position that they will refuse to listen even to the church is to be treated like "a Gentile and a tax collector." It is ironic (and probably intentionally so) that this passage follows the parable of the lost sheep and precedes the response to Peter's question about how often one has to forgive a brother who sins (repeatedly) against you.

Jesus says, essentially, that being a member of the church means you have a responsibility. If your sheep gets lost you don't look for an hour and call it quits. You immediately get out there and take the necessary time to find that sheep. You set no limits on the time needed. If your brother sins against you seventy-seven times, that's how many times you forgive him. Again, you set no limits on your forgiveness. Whether it's looking for a lost sheep, forgiving your brother, or looking for ways to resolve conflict, you have a responsibility.

Jesus then repeats what he taught in Matthew 16 (and something we talked about just two weeks ago - "Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven". Jesus also echoed these thoughts again later in John 20 when he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained".

This is from Matthew Henry's Commentary and it really opened this verse up to me: First, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. If the censures of the church duly follow the institution of Christ, His judgments will follow the censures of the church, for Christ will not suffer his own ordinances to be trampled upon, but will say amen to the righteous sentences which the church passes on to obstinate offenders.

Secondly, whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. No church censures bind so fast, but that, upon the sinner's repentance and reformation, they may and must be loosed again. Sufficient is the punishment which has attained its end, and the offender must then be forgiven and comforted. There is no unpassable gulf fixed but that between hell and heaven. Those who, upon their repentance, are received by the church into communion again may take the comfort of their absolution in heaven, if their hearts be upright with God.

Notice that Jesus follows this with talk about the power of agreement, saying that anything that is agreed upon by two on earth will be done for them by the Father in heaven. This is a promise. But notice as well that this is not where Jesus ends. Jesus says last, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." There is no question of agreement at this point.

Jesus is present, really present, where two or three are gathered in the Divine Name, not just where two or three agree in Jesus' name, but where two or three are gathered; I believe this includes the two who cannot listen to each other about a matter of sin, and how to handle it. Even there, perhaps especially there, Christ Jesus is present.

The subject matter of this passage could not be more fitting for Christian communities in every age, place, and situation. One of the things that plagues most Christian communities (and other communities no doubt) is the inability to handle confrontation, disagreement and our mutual accountability when it comes to sin. We simply sometimes don't know how to live together, agree together, and stay together. And this is because all of us -- and not just our brother or sister -- are sinners.

In these verses, Jesus offers a guide to help us handle our sin and its consequences. But far more importantly Jesus promises us that he is present, that his presence is real for us, when we are gathered in his name--both in agreement, and in sin.

Jesus closes with words that offer comfort and strength –

“Where two or three meet in My name, I shall be there with them.”

This is not a random meeting of a few believers coming together – but a gathering of people who have come together in a unity of heart and of purpose.

The Kingdom is to be a place of openness, trust and honesty where differences can be aired and forgiveness given and received.