

“Where Two or Three are Gathered...”
 September 10, 2017
 Text: Matthew 18:15-20

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
 14th Sunday after Pentecost

"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."

So, here is Jesus giving methods for resolving conflict in the church. He is showing ways to bring reconciliation with one another, and what to do when people refuse to listen. It is God's desire to bring healing and wholeness to the body of Christ. And when reconciled people gather in the name of Jesus, it's important to know what happens when their prayers are aligned with the will of God.

What is the Church?

"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."

In this passage Matthew uses the word "church." But what does he mean? In the original Greek language, which is how the gospels were written, the Greek word for church is ekklesia, which may be better translated as "community of faith." Church, as we know it, does not exist until the 3rd century. So, when we hear "church" in Matthew's gospel, think more of communities of faith. We consider ourselves a church; and we are part of a long standing tradition and centuries old institution. But we develop a more dynamic understanding if we consider ourselves as part of a community of faith. Perceptions of what the "church" is tend to see things as they happen here on the inside. But a "community of faith," as its name implies, is something that exists not just in here, but beyond these walls, extending to places and people out there.

Problems Will Arise

But Jesus knows something about these communities of faith. Problems will arise. Human beings are prone to sin. Sin being anything that separates us from God and estranges us one from another. Offenses will happen. Intentional or not, people will hurt other people. How we respond to these situations is what Jesus is addressing in this passage. Because for the sake of our mission, which is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, God is sustaining and reconciling communities of faith. And so Jesus outlines three basic steps to take if someone has wronged you.

Step One: Go directly to the person who has hurt you. Deal only with them. No need to gossip about it with anyone else. Simply go to the person and address the situation. If they listen to you, understanding what they done to hurt you, then forgiveness and reconciliation are on the way. But step one may not work. They may not listen to you. The problem goes unresolved; which takes you to step two.

Step Two: Enlist the help of two or three others to go with you to the person so they can serve as unbiased witnesses. If the person still refuses to listen, step three becomes necessary.

Step Three: Bring the issue to the entire community of faith. If the person does not listen to the whole community, then, Jesus says, let them be to you like the tax collectors and Gentiles.

Tax Collectors and Gentiles

Nobody likes the tax collectors. Then, or now. These people who take our money and hand it over to Caesar. In Jesus's culture the tax collectors were fellow Jews who had sold out to the occupying forces of Rome to do the dirty work of collecting whatever money they could get, pay the government what was due, and pocket the rest for themselves.

A Gentile, of course, was any who is not Jewish. Gentiles exist outside of the community of the people of God, and they have nothing to do with them. So Jesus draws on two vivid examples from the culture to describe how to deal with someone who refuses to be reconciled even when the entire community has made its case. And it appears that Jesus may be suggesting some kind of shunning. We could easily think of our own examples of those in our culture who should be kept out of community. Who do you think does not belong in a church? This step three is very serious.

But remember, now, we are talking about Jesus, who was known for hanging out with tax collectors and Gentiles. We are talking about Jesus who spent more time in the streets and on the road with sinners, lepers, prostitutes, and the demon-possessed than he did in the temple and synagogues with the righteous.

Thank God Jesus hung around with Gentiles and tax collectors, and people who take longer than most to get it. No one is beyond the far reaching grace of God. Thank God, for our sake, this is the case.

But at the base of this whole approach is reconciled relationships. Relationships between human beings; relationships with the entire community, and our relationship with God.

Binding and Loosing and Agreement in Prayer

There is a good reason for all of this. Jesus leaves this important instruction with his disciples with intent. There is value in a community where the members make peace with one another and with God. As Jesus now makes a larger point he says,

“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.”

There is a connection between heaven and earth. And binding and loosing has to do with the interpretation and application of the law as found in the Holy Scriptures. If anyone enters into this task, then they must be aligned with the will of God. If any dare to take the Bible and use it to condemn or justify another, they better be sure what they say on earth is in accordance with what is said in heaven. This is why we pray to God in the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

When our will is aligned with the will of God and a community of faith is reconciled one to another there is something astounding that comes next. Jesus makes an audacious statement when 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.”

Consider for a moment the power being made available in this statement.

“If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”

But there is a condition: Requests must be made with purity of heart, as if Jesus himself resides in your hearts. This is why Jesus says,

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

This is why we always pray in the name of Jesus. When the name of Jesus is invoked, we are reminded of the truth of Jesus the Christ. Then our prayers are coordinated with each other and coordinated with the kingdom of heaven and the power of the Holy Spirit is activated.

The Importance of Being United

We are lucky to be called *United* Methodists. It reminds us to keep coming back together. A reconciled community is a vital community that will bring about positive change. When there is strain in the body of Christ our prayers are compromised and the mission suffers. But for the sake of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, God is sustaining and reconciling communities of faith. Going to those who have hurt you is important. Bringing others to assess the situation may be necessary. Sometimes a full public hearing will be called for. But no one is beyond the reach of God’s grace, and reconciliation is always possible when forgiveness is granted. A community of faith that can embrace this will see amazing things happen in the name of Jesus. This is crucial time we live in, and our prayers are important. Forgive each other, be reconciled one to another, and agree in your prayers. Amen.