

## WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED

Pentecost 14 Year A

Ex. 12:1-14; Ps. 149; Rom. 13:8-14; Mt. 18:15-20

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A confirmed bachelor and a married man were talking to each other one day about the pros and cons of family life. At one point in the conversation, the married man asked:

“Do you know what it means for a dad to come home to three adorable well-mannered, respectful children who are thrilled at the sight of your coming home?”

“Do you know what it means to come home to three adorable, well-mannered children who hang on your every word and think you are the smartest person and the best guy in the whole wide world?”

To which the bachelor replied, “No. What does it mean?”

“It means that you’re in the wrong house,” said the father.

It is my considered opinion, that it is often the same in the church—particularly when speaking of the relationship between a minister and their congregation, or indeed between members of a congregation.

Someone once said: If you ever find the perfect church, by all means join it. Just know that it will no longer be perfect. Or as Charles Spurgeon once said: “The day we find the perfect church, it becomes imperfect the moment we join it.” So basically, you’re the problem. Well...me too, I suppose, but we won’t go into that too closely.

It may surprise you to know, that in the almost 25 years in which I have been in ministry, I have noticed, from time to time, that some people just can’t get along. I have noticed that some people—in the church no less—have arguments, harbour bitterness towards others and hurt each other in things that they say and do.

One of the things I like best about the New Testament is that it is so practical. It must have been the fact that Jesus had human beings called disciples always with him that forced him to speak in such everyday terms about everyday problems. Sometimes Christians disagree in the congregation of believers. Sometimes they quarrel. Sometimes they hold grudges against each other.

So, ever the practical man, Jesus, in our reading today from Matthew’s account of the gospel, gives us some guidelines on how we should handle these kinds of breakdowns in relationships within the church—breakdowns that can, if left unresolved, cause churches to fold or split or cause people to live in a toxic and abusive church environment. And no-one wants that, surely—unless you’re the bully, that is.

In Matthew chapter 18, Jesus admits that his disciples are going to have conflicts—conflicts are inevitable—but they are to resolve them—quickly and pastorally. It isn’t a matter that Christians are perfect and won’t have conflicts. There will always be quarrels, differences of opinion on how and who, disappointments with preachers and church councils, hurt feelings, bent pride, loss of face, and *lots* of mistakes. It’s the idea

that Christians can resolve these conflicts as no other fellowship or community can, that Jesus puts before us today.

When we are hurt by another person—when someone sins against us, there are usually two great temptations: The first is to strike back with vengeance and spite—“Boy I’ll really show them. Just you wait” The second is to put on a fake smile and pretend that everything is just *fine*. Some people are naturally drawn to one or the other of these. Sometimes we’re drawn to one or the other because of the situation or the person involved.

But, neither way brings peace. Peace only comes from the hard, and sometimes painfully awkward, work of reconciliation.

Jesus’ model of conflict resolution is a carefully-staged process. If another member of the church has wronged you, he says, proceed to Step One: Go to the other person, yourself, and point out what that person has done wrong. No witnesses. Just the two of you. Man to man...or woman to woman...as it were.

If that doesn’t work, proceed to Step Two: take one or two others along with you, and repeat the process. There’s a very practical reason for bringing the others along. It’s so they can serve as witnesses if Step Two likewise doesn’t work.

You’re going to need those witnesses if you have to move on to Step Three. In Step Three, you “tell it to the church.” There’s still hope the other person will come around, realizing what pain he or she has caused, and repenting for it. But, Jesus goes on, “if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Here is a careful, measured series of slowly-escalating steps. It’s the Grievance Procedure of the first-century church.

But what about the witnesses that Jesus refers to? What’s this about? The reference, Jesus makes to taking “one or two others along with you” if the person who has sinned against you refuses to listen to you, has its origins way back in Deuteronomy 19:15, where it states that: *“A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained.”*

In other words, if the personal approach doesn’t establish a repair to the broken relationship, having one or two witness to the situation, may add some pastoral pressure to the person who has sinned against you, to repent and seek reconciliation. They also become witnesses that you’ve tried your best to make reconciliation. After all, you’re the one who’s been wronged. If that doesn’t work, then the matter goes the church (in their case, the local congregation—for us it would probably be the Church Council) where the matter will inevitably become more public. If the offender still

refuses to listen and remains unrepentant, they are then to be regarded as you would a Gentile and a tax collector.

This then begs the question: How do you treat Gentiles and tax collectors? Well, how did Jesus treat Gentiles and Tax Collectors? Did he reject them? Did he refuse to associate with them? Did he criticise or castigate the Gentiles and tax collectors who came to him for healing or forgiveness? The answer, of course, is: “No!” He ate with them and talked with them about faith in God. So, what were the implications for the disciples then and, as a consequence, for the church that would follow?

Before I answer that, I’ll ask another question: What does it mean for someone to refuse to repent of sin and reject the offer of reconciliation? Well, basically, it means that they have not understood the gospel. And what do you do with people who do not understand the gospel? You preach it to them again—and again—and again—until they *do* get it and can once again be folded back into the flock.

What did this mean, then, for the early church? Did it mean that you were to throw this person out of the church (remember, at the time, there was no other church or denomination they could run off to, like today) and forbid them to have any involvement in the life and worship of the church? Well, partly yes—but there’s more to it than that. On the one hand, the person would be forbidden to participate in any of the mysteries of God—namely the sacraments—especially the Eucharist, or Holy Communion.

In the Early church, only baptised members in good standing within the congregation could even be present during Holy Communion. The Orthodox Church still today (largely symbolically now) before the communion service begins, the deacon or priest calls out: “The doors, the doors.” This was the signal that all unbaptised participants were to leave the sanctuary, and the doors of the church would be closed. The mysteries of God were not to be offered or even on display to those who were not part of the church. Today, of course, the cat is largely out of the bag, and even in the Orthodox Church today non-members are allowed to stay during Holy Communion—they’re just not able to partake of the elements.

That’s certainly one aspect to the response of those who refused to repent and accept reconciliation. But it doesn’t stop there. As I mentioned earlier, Jesus’ admonition indicates that we are to start again with the message of the gospel—to re-explain the purpose of Christ’s death on the cross for our sin—so that we (and they) might receive forgiveness from God—and thereby seek it from others and offer it when others have hurt us. As C.S. Lewis once said: “If God forgives us, we must forgive others. Otherwise it is almost like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than him.”

It’s here, then, that we come to the subject of binding and loosing. I’m sure we all know or have heard of some Christians who like to bind this and loose that—sometimes with gay abandon. However, a more accurate translation and understanding of the Greek, in this context would be...

*“Whatever you bind (aor. subj.) on earth will have been bound in heaven (perf. pass. part.), and whatever you loose (aor. subj.) on earth will have been loosed (perf. pass. part.), in heaven.”*

In other words, what this means is that not only does the church have the authority to judge people in the church, where sin is concerned, but whatever the leadership of the church judges to be the case, in matters of church discipline, is something that has already been decided upon in heaven. Therefore, our “binding” and “loosing” in this context, only confirms the judgement of God—and has absolutely nothing to do with the ways the terms “binding” and “loosing” are often used in some churches today.

And this is where the two or three gathered together agreeing comes in at the end of the passage. Jesus says, *“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.”*

Usually we hear people quote this last part in response to a poorly attended prayer meeting or Bible Study—and I’ve been to a few of those—but ultimately, that understanding is more than slightly flawed in this context. If we were to take the analogy further, one might then ask, does it then mean that God is not present when I am on my own? Well, of course not! So, that’s not what it’s talking about.

Having the agreement of two or three people (i.e. the witnesses, referred to earlier) is not some kind of magic formula to ensure God’s presence, or a condition that forces God to answer our prayer. What it *does* imply, however, is that they have met as disciples—as leaders of the church—and have made a decision, presumably in conjunction with prayer, which God has *already* endorsed. Christians are thereby given the assurance that Christ is present with those who are diligently concerned with understanding God’s mind and will—and make pastoral decisions—such as considering people as Gentiles and Tax Collectors—for the good of the whole community.

What we also need to understand here—and this is really important—is that Jesus’ teaching in Matthew is not about excluding someone who has sinned from the church,. It’s about drawing back in to the church those who have strayed. It’s not about punishment, it’s about pastoral care. The whole purpose of any kind of exclusion or discipline for some sin is to bring that person to repentance and reconciliation.

We in the church, don’t always do that well, but Jesus instructions to us, here in Matthew chapter 18, should guide us as we seek to be Christ’s reconciled people in this place.

To him be all the glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.