

September 10, 2017: Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Matthew 18:15-20: Reconciliation

Last week I preached for 24 minutes and 40 seconds. So I owe you some time. I honestly thought this morning you would get it back, all 280 seconds of it. I thought you might even end up owning me some time by the time I was through, but it's not happening. I'm going to dig myself an even deeper whole this morning. Prepare to be here a while.

The reason I thought that was because I didn't think I could really say a whole lot about this passage. It seems pretty straightforward. These seem to be instructions for how to kick someone out of your church. We could call it by its technical term, excommunication. It sounds a little more proper that way. But no matter what we call it, it amounts to the same thing. This looks like God giving us permission to go to those people that we don't particularly like, or that disagree with us, or rub us the wrong way, or that we just don't get along with, and ask/tell them to leave. And say to them, as they walk by, with a smile of contentment on our face, "Don't let the door hit you where the good Lord split you." At least some people see this passage that way.

It reminds me of the way some parents view corporal punishment, like spanking, or paddling. Some time ago I was watching a documentary that was exploring the use of corporal punishment and asking questions of its appropriateness and effectiveness. The producers of the documentary were clearly against it, but were trying to give the appearance of objectivity. So they featured people on both sides of the issue. But naturally the people in favor of it were not the best people they could have chosen to represent that side.

For example, there was this one woman who was passionately sharing her perspective on the issue. "If my kids disrespect me in my house I'm going to whoop their tail. I'm not putting up with that mess. I will throw them up against the wall and slap them silly." Clearly, she thought of corporal punishment as a means of protecting her pride, and asserting her authority. And you could tell that anger was a driving force for her. You got the sense that her exercise of corporal punishment bordered on child abuse, or bullying, or both.

I don't know where you stand on the issue. My personal feeling is that the use of corporal punishment isn't the kind of thing that should be celebrated, a source of pride, and certainly not carried out in anger, as a knee jerk reaction to certain kinds of behavior. It should be a reasoned decision, not made in the heat of the moment, but out of love, in the interest of raising up a child to be a productive, contributing member of society. When a parent says, "This hurts me more than it hurts you," there ought to be at least a little bit of truth in it.

When my parents said that to me I thought they were selling me something. But then when I became a parent I understood what they meant. We rarely spank our children. (Right now somebody is thinking, "Well that's obvious.") But there have been situations where we felt it was appropriate.

All that is to say, I think an argument can be made in support of corporal punishment in some cases. But it's hard to justify corporal punishment as a license to lose your temper and abuse your child, which is how some people see it.

Likewise, Jesus' words to his disciples here make the case that there may be a time when removing someone from your church is the right thing to do. But it is not to be abused. It is not a license to rid your church of all the people you don't like, as much as we might wish that it were.

More than just make the case that removing someone from the church is sometimes the right thing to do, Jesus describes a very specific procedure that should be followed. But before we can even consider the procedure we need to understand that it only applies to the worst offenses, because the consequences are so severe. This is not what you do when someone sits in your pew, or takes your afghan. The word “offend” is kind of misleading, because we are offended by so many things. This is reserved for the times when someone really hurts you.

And it’s not just when they really hurt you. In most English translations the passage begins, “If another member of the church (or brother or sister) sins against you,” but you may have a foot note in your Bible that tells you that about half of the earliest copies we have of Matthew’s gospel don’t have that word “you,” suggesting it’s not only when somebody really hurts you that these steps need to be taken, but when somebody does something that hurts any one who is a part of the church. A little bit later I will give you a couple examples of situations that would qualify.

The first thing to do is to go to the offender, in private, and share your concerns with them. Whenever we have a problem with someone we are tempted to tell someone else about it, but this usually only makes the problem worse. We need to go to them directly. And it is so important to do it in a private, not in the foyer, or on facebook, or in any way others can listen in. It can make the person defensive, and less willing to admit any wrongdoing. And it is best to do it in person, not through email, or text message, or anything else like that. If you are like me, you might find it helpful to write down what you want to say first. And then you can just go read it them.

In some cases, it is helpful to go to someone we trust, like your spouse, or a pastor, and use them as a sounding board, to see if our feelings are legitimate. We might wonder, “am I right to feel this way?” or “am I making a bigger deal out of this than I should?” That could save you from an embarrassing and pointless conversation with the person. I am more than happy to be your sounding board. And what you say to be will be confidential. But if you ask me to talk to them for you, I won’t do it. Especially if you want to remain anonymous.

So once you have made up your mind, the first step is to talk to them. In a perfect world, this first step should be all that’s necessary, but it doesn’t always happen that way. If you do go to the person in private and they don’t listen, or laugh it off, or deny any wrongdoing, find two or three others to go with you to have a second conversation with the individual.

Obviously these two or three individuals should not be your blood relatives, or your best friends, who could easily be biased toward your position, or at least give that impression. These two or three should be leaders in the church who have a reputation for being honest, fair, and Christ-like.

What you hope to achieve by doing this is bring a more objective, communal perspective to the situation, and to seek the corporate guidance of the Holy Spirit. These individuals could help you see that you were overreacting, or mistaken in some way. Or they could convince the person that has hurt you that they have done something they shouldn’t. But sometimes this doesn’t work either.

So the third and final step is to tell it to the church. If the group of two or three determines that the offender has truly done something wrong, and the offender is still unwilling to acknowledge this wrong and seek forgiveness, then the matter is taken before the entire church family. This demonstrates an even greater reliance on in the corporate guidance of the Holy Spirit in the Church. If the church agrees,

and if the offender refuses to listen to the church, to confess their sin and seek forgiveness, they are to be asked to leave, and the members of the church family are told to no longer associate with them.

Thankfully this isn't something you see everyday. This would be a big deal to happen in any church, but it was an even bigger deal in the early days of the Church. Today, if someone was asked to leave their church they could simply go to the church down the street, but in the early days of the Church, there was only one Church. It was basically telling someone; you can't be a part of what God is doing in the world.

But as harsh as it sounds, we have to keep in mind that it was not intended to be a permanent reality, but a temporary one. Restoration and reconciliation were always available to the offender was willing to admit their wrong and seek forgiveness. And the importance of forgiveness is what Jesus will talk about in the verses that immediately follow these.

This is another expression of what it means to carry out the responsibility of binding and loosing that we have talked about the last couple weeks. God gave this authority first to Peter, then the Apostles, and finally, to his Church. Until Christ returns, the Church represents the kingdom of God on earth. It tells the world, as best as it can, the truth about God. It is a high and holy calling, and it is ours as followers of Jesus. And the truth must be protected at any cost.

We struggle with carrying out this responsibility...

In part because we think sin is strictly personal. When think if a person has sin in their life it is between the individual and God. It is nobody else's business. But that's not true in all cases. Sin does not happen in a vacuum. The effects of sin can go beyond the individual to impact the community of which they are a part. We see it happen in families. We see it happen in churches. When you see sin among the members of your church family, God wants you to make it your business.

You might say, well I am not in the place to judge. I do things I shouldn't do too. We think to call someone out for their sin would make us a hypocrite, and we don't want to be guilty of that. But we are not approaching them out of a position of superiority, but humility. We are not claiming to be perfect either. We are just trying to help them be the person God created them to be.

Even if we are guilty of doing the same thing we see someone else doing, we shouldn't just throw our hands up and say that we have no right to call them out on it. We should address the sin in our own life, repent, ask God for forgiveness, and then go to that brother or sister and tell them what God has done for us.

Maybe we worry about doing or saying something that will harm our relationships with other members of the church. Or we are afraid that if we approach someone about something they will leave the church on their own, and we don't want to lose members. I get it. I worry all the time that I might offend someone and they will get upset at me, or leave the church, or both. I try to choose my words so carefully, but is still likely to happen. I have done it before.

Several years ago I preached a sermon on the story of Jesus turning the water into wine. And I tried to make the point of how God wants us to experience joy in life. He doesn't expect us to go through life miserable all the time. After the sermon a member of the congregation approached me and asked for a copy of the sermon. It made me feel kind of good. I thought he was asking because he really liked it or

something. As I handed it to him he said, “Now I have the proof I need. You basically encouraged us all to go out and get drunk this afternoon. And I will never be back.”

Several months ago I preached a sermon about how the message of the Gospel offends people. At one point during the sermon someone got up and left. That afternoon I was talking to Dawn about how worried I was that I had offended someone and she said, “Well isn’t that what the sermon was about?”

The truth is, we have to care more about obeying God than making everybody like us, or getting everybody to come to our church. We are accountable to the God who has entrusted us with his Gospel. We have a responsibility to preserve the integrity of this message, a faithfully carry out our responsibilities of holding the keys to heaven and binding and losing.

So we are accountable to God. But we are also accountable to each other. When we become a part of the body of Christ we are making a commitment to our brothers and sisters to support them, and encourage them as they journey with Christ. Part of this support comes in the form of calling them out on their sin. We should expect them to do the same for us. Sin that goes unchecked can destroy a church. I’ve seen it happen. We owe it to ourselves and each other to protect this community from forces and people that would threaten to undo it.

This is really about our love for God and our love for each other. If you truly love someone, you will be willing to risk their feelings toward you in the interest of protecting their relationship with God and their relationships with others. It really might hurt you more than it hurts them, but love will sometimes require that of you. Moving through this procedure that Jesus outlines here, has to be motivated by love. If you can’t say you are doing it out of love, then you shouldn’t do it.

I said I would give you a couple examples of where I thought this kind of thing was appropriate. I’ll do that, then I’ll be through.

The first incident occurred at a church I attended while I was in college, before I was a pastor. There was a group of young adults, married people with families, that met together for what some people refer to a small group. They would study the Bible, share prayer requests, etc. But there were two people who attended who started to form an inappropriate bond, a man and a woman, who were both married, but to different people.

You can guess what happened. Eventually the two individuals started meeting together alone. Soon their relationship turned into a full-blown affair. They both decided to end their respective marriages so they could marry one another. You have seen this kind of thing happen enough that you can just imagine the destructive consequences. Children were involved, on both sides. Friends in the church took sides. Relatives of the individuals who attended the church began to distance themselves from one another. It was awful.

So why am I telling you this. Knowing what I do about how romance blossoms, I can’t believe somebody, or several somebodies, didn’t see something that would have alerted them to this possibility. The way these people looked at each other in the small group Bible study. The way they interacted with one another. Whatever. They thought that what they were witnessing just wasn’t right, but for whatever reason, they didn’t say something. What if they had?

The second example comes from personal experience, in a church where I served as pastor. I have alluded to this several times in different contexts. I have seven pages of notes that I made, detailing the situation, but I will try to tell you the short version.

A woman in my congregation was not happy with some things I was doing and saying. Nothing I haven't done or said here. Nothing that was outside of the beliefs and practices of the denomination I was a part of. But she didn't like it and she didn't like me. Which, while hard to comprehend, is not a problem. It was the way she acted on her feelings that was.

She basically tried to form a coalition of people to force me out of the church. She contacted my superiors. She sent emails and letters to other church members, and board members, trying to convince them of where I had gone wrong. I wrote a blog at the time, and she would go through and pull quotes out of context to try to make her case. She would do the same with copies of my sermons. She made many hurtful, insulting, and untrue statements about me. The people she won over to her side did many of the same things. One came by my office and just laid in to me. It was not a good day at the office.

Over time I learned that I was not the first pastor she had treated this way. She had done it to several before me. One she had even accused of having an affair. This was a pattern for her, a very destructive pattern that was destroying the church and hindering the work of the Holy Spirit.

I tried to follow the procedure outlined here. I met with her alone. Not only did she refuse to listen, she took words that I said in those private conversations and twisted them to support her views. So I met with the leadership of the church to get my two or three. They reached out, but she refused to meet with them. To make a long story short, they did not see the process to completion. And for the same reasons many of us struggle with even the first step, but mostly because they were afraid of the way it would impact the church. These were good people. They didn't want to lose her and whoever else she might take with her.

I am so glad she didn't follow me here. I am so glad none of you are like her. You have no idea what a blessing it is to pastor a group of people that love each other, and care for each other, and get along with each other, for the most part. We could always do more. We could always love more, and care more, and live in even greater harmony with one another. And we always need to be willing to do the hard work that God calls us to, to make this church the church he wants it to be. God will give us the grace and strength we need to do what he asks us to do.