

Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵If a brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If they listen to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If the brother or sister 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about a dispute, if you ask it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Matthew 18:15-20, 2014

This gospel passage for today is one that I believe requires a much closer look if we are to be faithful to the intent and purpose of Jesus' teaching. This is one of those passages that has some translation variants applied to it possibly based on some theological perspective of the translator.

There are also parts that have been taken out of context in their application in everyday life.

I believe it is important to flush some of this out when we have the opportunity.

With that in mind I am sure that as I read the gospel lesson you noticed I changed the wording of a couple of the verses. At the very beginning of the passage I exchanged "a brother or sister of yours" in the place of "another member of the church."

I did this first off because it is more true to the original text where the Greek word "ἀδελφός" (adelphos) which means brother is used, and secondly because this translation opens us up to treating all our friends, family, co-workers, class mates in a better way.

Even if they are not a part of the church.

I am not saying that the translation given us in the NRSV is wrong because it does accurately fit the context of the lesson Jesus is teaching since the church is an actor in the drama, and because He has been teaching about how the community of faith is to live together.

In the earliest years of church development the churches were often formed around family, and so the same dynamics of a particular family regarding conflict would be lived out in the church.

This lesson becomes important for them as Jesus is teaching a better way. It isn't lost on us in the church today either.

In the 18th chapter Jesus is teaching his followers about humility and forgiveness, sparing one another harm and not causing another to stumble in their faith;

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.”

Then Jesus tells the parable of the shepherd who goes off leaving the 99 sheep to find the one that went astray, recovering the lost, making the flock whole again,

Jesus goes on to say, “It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”

Now He tells the disciples how it is that the community may be kept in tact despite the disagreements and conflict that will occur among them.

It really boils down to two actions; talking and more importantly, listening.

But, these actions must be taken in the right spirit.

There were a couple of people in a congregation I served before coming here who were upset with a decision that was made, and the process by which the decision was made left them feeling like they had been forced into going along with a decision they did not agree with. It left them upset, a little angry and they felt like they had become a party to someone else's sin.

These people had a choice to make. They could just talk between themselves and try to deal with the matter, and allow it to eat at them and fester and finally come out in some other inappropriate way or time.

They could have opened the conversation to others in the congregation and gotten a group of others upset and a large conflict would ensue.

Or they could call the ones involved and share their concerns, how they felt about the matter, talk it through and search for reconciliation.

I was glad they chose to call me. We were able to talk about their concerns. We were able to put the matter to rest with them clearly feeling better about the decision and able to have a clear conscience.

We were able to regain one another's trust,

We restored their relationship with the community and were able to continue to be God's people together, and side-by-side face the cross of Christ in thanks for his love and grace which guides, heals and blesses.

Think about what it took for them to do this.

Think about what it takes to follow through with the process laid out in this gospel lesson, or any part of it.

Put your self in that role of the one who has been "sinned against."

First off, if you are that one the responsibility is on you to initiate the reconciliation.

If the goal is to restore the relationship and bring peace back to the community it is going to require some humility, and some courage.

Do you remember what it was like to tell a family member or friend that they "sinned against you," or hurt you, or did something that compromised your values, or beliefs?

It hasn't been that long since I had to have one of those conversations with a family member who I believed violated my trust and values in her relationship with our daughter.

Those can be pretty tough conversations to get started with a family member, let alone a friend, or a fellow church member.

You know there are so many people who think of the church as family, but I wonder, do you have the kind of relationship here that will allow you to have this kind of conversation?

You know, there are so many people who think of the church a family, but I wonder, do you have the kind of relationships here that will allow this kind of conversation.

They are conversations that can have some pretty dire consequences because not everyone is willing to hear about their own mistakes.

A pastor friend of mine once told me about two women who were causing a lot of commotion in the church because one had hurt the feelings of the other. He finally called them into the office, sat them down together and told them they weren't leaving the room until they worked it out.

He then left the room and about 20 minutes later after all the shouting and screaming was over he went back in and found they had each decided they were being silly.

They had made up.

Moving on in the passage it is interesting that in the second step of this process Jesus lays out that the offended one is to take one or two others with them to witness every word, and again the goal is to listen and restore.

This is interesting because it may be that when the three or four sit down to talk it could be that it is revealed that the offended one is the one in the wrong,

or that they have misunderstood, or may have contributed to the situation in some way.

That is not so uncommon is it? Things aren't always as clear as we think they are.

I find it to be that way in all sorts of situations just as I am sure you do. There truly are at least two sides to every story.

In ancient Hebrew times at least two witnesses were required to bring a case against someone, and so this follows the expectations of the community.

It is in community that faith life is experienced and lived as we are together the body of Christ in the world.

Community is important!

Related to this I want to call your attention to the other verse I changed, verse 19.

In verse 19 the text from the NRSV says,

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

Of course that word “anything” can cover any number of agreements, some of which God may support and others, maybe not so much

The Greek word πράγματος (pragmatos) that is here translated “anything,” is translated in 1 Corinthians 6:1 to mean “dispute or grievance.”

“if two of you agree on earth about a dispute...” draws you back to the previous verses and the subject of Jesus’ lesson; settling a dispute or conflict between two people.

For where two or three are gathered in Jesus name, He is there among them for listening, for restoring relationships.

Along with verse 19, verse 20 has also been misused throughout time since they were written I would suspect.

If two of you get together and decide that one of you needs a new job, a new car or home or a bank account full of money, or to win the lottery,

the likelihood that God will handle that straight-away for you just because you got together with another Jesus-follower and had a prayer is pretty slim.

This is not the magic formula for getting the answer you want to every prayer you pray. What we experience in faith is very different from that.

I have seen so much frustration and disappointment in the lives of people who take these two verses out of their context and apply them in ways Jesus never intended.

Pastor we got together and prayed for healing and Jesus said where two or three are gathered our prayers would be answered.

Faith is not strengthened then. The believer is not nourished and their life not enriched by faith then.

I am not saying that God does not hear and answer prayers, He certainly does.

In fact my experience is that before we can even pray God has been at work providing exactly what we will need to live lives of fulfillment, joy, promise and faith.

I am also not saying that God is not present where two or three are gathered together for other purposes like fishing, golfing, gardening, fellowship, work, and play.

I would not discount Jesus' presence anywhere at any time.

But, I do know from this gospel lesson today that in the gathering of people for the listening, and speaking,
for the restoring and reconciling of relationships God is there as Emmanuel,
God with us in the presence of Jesus.

And even if the relationship is not restored, Jesus remains. This verse that says "...and even if the offender refuses to listen to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." is heard so many times, too many times, as justification for punishing someone by exclusion from the community.

Clearly, that is not Jesus' intention.

If you look through the stories of Jesus' encounters with these Gentiles and tax collectors you discover that they are the ones who he associates and eats with, and they are even the people who will enter the kingdom of heaven before the religious authorities.

There was Zacchias, the Canaanite woman from a couple of weeks ago and the story of the Samaritan woman at the well.

Jesus had compassion on them, restored them, renewed them, healed them, he loved them. He included them.

There was Matthew himself, a tax collector who became an apostle.

What Jesus gives us here is a lesson on how we are called to live together in the community of faith, the family of faith if you will.

And it is for the healing of the body of Christ in the broken places.

This passage speaks against the individualization of the Christian faith. This faith we have needs to be lived in community because we need one another.

We need to be together for effective prayer, to experience Jesus' presence in our midst, to bear one another's burdens and share our joys. We need to help each other keep our faith as we live in a culture where the Christian faith is losing sway and influence in the mainstream.

We need to be together to encourage each other to faith in times of illness, loss, death, and remind each other of God's presence and provision in times of joy and fulfillment.

Community is important!

When we are together, there is Jesus in the midst of us.

Amen