

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 6, 2020  
Matthew 18: 15-20, Romans 13: [1-7] 8- 14 and Ezekiel 33: 7-11  
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*Surprised by the Character of God*

In the 39 years that I have been a pastor I have employed the process of Matthew 18 twice. Both times it was necessary to confront behavior that was destructive to the peace of the community. The first occasion the process moved to the second stage, that is I had a private conversation, and that was followed by a three way conversation, the third party selected because our congregational leaders felt he was someone the troublesome individual trusted and respected. The second time the issue was “resolved” after the first conversation.

In both cases the specific disruptive behavior stopped. In both cases the individual involved withdrew from the congregation. So my question to you is, “Did the process outlined in Matthew 18 ‘work’?”.

To answer my own question, the process worked on one level, but I am convinced that the process did not work as Jesus intended. The process stopped some bad behavior, and please understand, that was necessary. But the process did not lead to any sort of reconciliation, rather it set up a win/lose dynamic. That is not spiritual goal of our faith.

Each of our lessons today are helpful in understanding this point, and I think it is an important point for the church in our time.

Ezekiel is not an easy book to read. Most of it is an indictment against the people of Judah. The prophet goes to great lengths to remind them of their failure to keep the covenant established by God. He repeatedly warns them of the consequences: famine, sickness, violent death and an exile into slavery.

So thorough is his indictment that the modern reader might find the prophets words somewhat tedious. How many times does he have to hammer home the same points? The text we heard this morning puts one more nail in that coffin. Then the prophet is given a surprising word, that reflects not the people’s sin, but the character of God.

*Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure  
in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn  
from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your  
evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?*

Human beings, including Christians, more easily gravitate to punishment than to grace. But if we are to understand the God who reveals himself to us through His relationship with Israel, and especially through His incarnation in Jesus, we must understand grace. The very creation of the world, and us in it, was done for a purpose. That purpose is best understood as love. “God so loved the world” ... and even when that love has been broken, the lover seeks to restore the relationship with the beloved. That is what we must understand, it is the empowering spiritual foundation upon which our faith is built.

Romans 13 is a much misunderstood and much abused passage of scripture. That part most abused is not included in the lectionary reading, so I want to add it this morning. The first seven verses of the chapter read as follows:

*1Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. 2Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; 4for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. 5Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. 6For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. 7Pay to all what is due them — taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.*

That passage has a troubled history within the Lutheran community. It was a principle text lifted up by the state church of Germany to insist on obedience to the policies of the Nazi government of the 1930's and 40's. It is a passage that is put forth anytime a government wants to insist on acquiescence to its policies. However that seems only to be done when those policies are evil in their intent.

To read this text as a call for absolute obedience to any secular authority is to misread Paul on this point. He is writing to the Christians in Rome, a community he had never visited at that point, and comprised primarily of people he did not yet know personally. One can understand that early believers, especially those of the disenfranchised classes of the Roman empire, observed the contrast between the good news of a God who loves them, values them, welcomes them and empowers them and their experience living in a culture that enslaved them, abused them, exploited them and used them. Perhaps one consequence was outbreaks of episodes of civil disobedience.

Paul's counsel to this community begins with a warning of the danger of such actions, but leads to the more central point of his theology, which was expressed in our lesson today.

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another;  
for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*

The place of a love that is not self centered, always seeking the welfare of the neighbor, even if they are a stranger, that love is central to the faith, example and teaching of Jesus. It is one key theological point that runs through the entire witness of the New Testament. Each of the gospel writers, the accompanying works of Luke and John, and Paul in his many letters all echo Jesus in his call for us to be a people guided by love.

Governments generally are unable to love as Jesus loved. Instead they utilize fear to control behavior, the fear of punishment. Even when that works to restrain a person's actions, it cannot transform one's heart. It can make us cower, but it cannot compel us to "lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light", "to live honorably ... and put on the Lord Jesus Christ". To do that, love must be present.

And now we are back at Matthew 18. Let us be clear about this, Matthew 18 is a passage about forgiveness, not control. It would be easy to miss that connection, especially since this passage is found in many church constitutions, including ours. On that level it can be useful

when a community has to confront someone whose behavior is destructive to the mission of the local church. It was because of that utilitarian value that it “worked on one level” in the two examples with which I opened this homily.

Ripping these verses, this “process” from its Gospel context, translates it into an institutional control policy, and in doing so can completely miss the truth that this passage is about forgiveness, not power.

Matthew 18 opens with a question from the disciples, “Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?”. Jesus looks around and brings into their circle the most inconsequential human he could find, a child. Now the Greek word is *paidion* which is not just any kid. It is a small child, perhaps even an infant. It is certainly a child who has little to recommend him or herself as “great”. Yet it is this wee little one that Jesus commends to his followers, “Whoever becomes as humble as this little child is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Then he goes on to talk about the value of one, in this case one sheep out of a hundred. The one sheep that wanders off and is in danger of being permanently lost. It is worth all your efforts, Jesus says, to find that one and restore it to the flock.

That leads directly into today’s text, and this three part process of restoring the relationship with one who sins. I’ll come back to that in just a moment.

Chapter 18 ends with another question, this one from Peter. He asks how often he has to make this effort. If my brother or sister sins against me again and again how far do I have to go in seeking to restore the relationship, as many as 7 times? “Not 7 times” Jesus will reply, “but 70 times 7.”. And he follows that with what I believe is one of the most powerful parables in Matthew’s Gospel, the parable of the unforgiving servant. But that’s next week’s text, so I say no more about that today.

Let’s go back to the process of restoring a relationship. First, go and talk to the offending person in private. Second, if he or she won’t respond try it again, but take one or two others along so it doesn’t become a “he said/ she said” argument. Finally, go to the whole community. This gets serious now, for now it is more like a trial than a conversation, but do give the offending person this third chance to repent.

If that fails, “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

If you are familiar with the culture of ancient Judaism, Gentiles and tax collectors were shunned. The first because the Gentiles are not “one of us”, and too close an association with them can be polluting, so keep them at a distance. The tax collector, on the other hand is “one of us”, but that one has betrayed the community by collaborating with the enemy. They are abject moral failures, who not only enforce the will of Gentile rulers, but impoverish their neighbors in order to enrich themselves. Since in most communities one is judged by the company one keeps, don’t keep their company.

That’s how this verse sounds to one who knows the law.

But it is not a lawyer who is giving this counsel, it is Jesus. I ask you, how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?

His encounter with Gentiles was limited, but when they needed him he healed their diseases, responded to their requests, and often affirmed them as ones of Great Faith!

Tax collectors? He did not shun them. He engaged them. He ate in their homes, attended their parties. He respected their humanity and appealed to the image of God he saw within them. A tax collector was even present among his chosen inner circle of disciples.

In short, it was not a legal code that guided Jesus' dealings with Gentiles and tax collectors. It was grace that guides his actions.

Knowing this, what does it mean to treat one among our own community as a "Gentile and a tax collector"?

It means that we love them. It means that we find a way to welcome them back into the community, not seek a justification for driving them out of it. And that can only happen if we are "great enough" to make the effort. Great as in embodying the humility of a wee little child. It only happens if we are passionate enough to make the community whole. Passionate like the shepherd who will leave everything, risk everything on the chance that one that is lost can be brought back into the flock. It will only happen if we are steeped in the practice of forgiveness. Not forgiveness that is a task we check off 3 times, or 7 times, but as the very way we live out our life when we "put on the Lord Jesus Christ". Forgiveness that we cannot withhold because we ourselves have been the recipients of such grace time and time again.

The spiritual path for the Christian is not a path governed by institutional policies, procedures, rules or justifications. It is rather a path that we walk while being formed by the very character of God. That character is one of forgiveness, of welcome, of inclusion and of love. Not once, but over and over, again and again. God's character is the very embodiment of grace. Grace, when truly experienced, truly transforms the heart. As the poet John Newton put it,

*Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come.  
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far  
And grace will lead me home.*