

Matthew 18: 15-20 One, Two, Three and *Not* Out!

Right up until when I came to join this church as your pastor, I was the Chaplain at Menaul School, a school in Albuquerque founded by a Presbyterian minister in 1896. In my last semester there, the school wanted me to teach ethics to the 7th graders.

Ethics is a study about moral judgment; how does one go about deciding what is morally right or wrong, just or unjust. It can be approached entirely as a secular subject, and I knew that the students would learn a full scope of “ethical” standards in high school: there is the Utilitarian Approach, the Common Good approach, the Virtue Approach, and so on.

But I’m the Chaplain at a Presbyterian school; I care about the spiritual growth of students. So, I told the school that if I were to teach ethics to our young people, it would be a course on the parables of Jesus and the textbook will be the Bible. They said, fine. So, I set out to preparing the curriculum.

Soon I realized, I couldn’t just jump to teaching the parables themselves without first presenting what was at the core of Jesus’ teaching. What was Jesus’ guiding principle for discerning God’s will? I had to start with Jesus’ religious heritage: the Torah, the Law of Moses in the Hebrew Scripture. So we started with the Ten Commandments, and it was exciting show the students that when Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest and he answered with the famous Double Commandment to “love your God with all your heart, soul and mind” and “love your neighbor as yourself,” he didn’t randomly come up with a neat summary of the law but was quoting from the Hebrew Scripture, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19: 18, just as Paul was doing in the passage from Romans that Leah read to us.

In this section of his letter to the church in Rome, Paul recites the 2nd tablet of the Ten Commandments, the part that has to do with our horizontal relationship with one another. Just as in Jesus’s summary of the law, Paul sets forth Love as the core guiding principle for the community of believers that is Christ’s church.

After learning about the Law of Moses and Jesus’ summary of the law, my students explored how this core principle of Love was the key to understanding the parable of Jesus. How Jesus was binding and loosing the law in the narrative of his parables. We learned a couple of weeks ago the language of “binding and loosing” refers to the practice by rabbis, the Jewish teachers, like Jesus, of applying the law to different situations.

By the way, for the final exam, the students wrote their own versions of the parable of Good Samaritan and shared them during Chapel. They blew my mind.

In today's Gospel reading, we have before us not a parable, but Jesus's instruction to the church. Jesus is preparing his disciples for how to be the church together, to be his body in the world together, when he is no longer walking alongside them. And when will their unity be most likely to be challenged? In the time of conflict.

So, hear now the Gospel according to Matthew 18: 15-20

15 "If your brother or sister sins against you,[a] go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have **regained** that one. 16 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. 17 If that person 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. 18 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. 19 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. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

How does this instruction sound to you? Or what did you hear in the instruction? Do you see the core principle of "Love your neighbor" at work here? Some people hear a harsh, stringent line of "tough love" being drawn. When a sibling in Christ has done you wrong, the first time, you go talk to the person, calling out the fault privately. If the person listens to you, well and good; if not, then go back to the person, the second time, taking one or two others with you as witnesses. If the person still doesn't listen, then, the third time, tell the church, and if the person refuses to listen even to the church, then, consider them like a Gentile and a tax collector, in other words, a sinner who doesn't belong. One, two, three and you're out. There is a limit to church's tolerance.

I know of a missionary couple who practiced this understanding of the passage. When new converts who joined their community made a mistake or broke a community guideline, they will deal them up to three times, but the next time the person failed, they will expel the person from the community and would have nothing more to do with them.

But a very different reading emerges if we read the parable Jesus told just before giving this instruction. The lesson follows Jesus's parable of the lost sheep that shows God's desire to recover those who are lost. God the good Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and goes after the one that went astray, and when that one is found, there is great rejoicing.

Notice Jesus's language in this lesson right after the parable; he says, when you first go talk to the person privately and he listens to you, "you REGAINED that one." The recovery of the one lost to sin is the focus and goal, not the punishment or vindictiveness.

And, if we continue reading beyond verse 20 where today's lesson ends, what comes next is the exchange between Peter and Jesus about how many times one must forgive the offender. Peter asked, "seven times?" Seven was a symbolic number for "fullness" or "completeness." So, forgiving someone seven times would mean complete forgiveness; and Jesus's answer is seventy-seven, or seven times seven, literally doubling down on the completeness of "seven." Christian forgiveness is beyond counting, beyond "fullness", beyond measure.

Jesus gave this instruction for dealing with an unrepentant and disruptive person in the church, placing it between the stories of unrelenting love of God for the lost soul and of the unbounded forgiveness. But what about the injunction about treating the unrepentant person as a Gentiles and tax collectors? We know that the Gentiles meant the outsiders and tax collectors sinners. But we also know, the Gentiles and tax collectors are exactly the ones Jesus reached out and befriended. They are the "lost" one to whom God goes after, and not the ones to be "cast away."

So, after striking one, two, and three times, the difficult person in the church becomes the very one the church reaches out to, with the hope and aim of "recovering." The church's intention in dealing with anyone, even the most difficult person, is reconciliation and the restoration of relationship, which is an endless process. Sound exhausting? But the church is empowered by the Spirit to the living God to live out the Spirit of the Law, which is God's Love. How we treat one another glorifies God.

And all along, from the time of private confrontation to mediation with witnesses to a hearing before the church, they are encouraged to pray. The thing "two or three" agree on earth to ask, is not just anything they want, the human things, but the divine things, which is to find the lost. We, the church, might not be able to "fix" the person, but we are to offer communal prayer that God might work in that person. And such prayer is offered not in a vindictive way, but in love. That's how we bind ourselves to the great commandment "Love your neighbor, especially the difficult ones, as yourself."

In the Jewish tradition wherever two or three rabbis discuss words of Torah, they are attended by the divine presence. Likewise, Matthew's church proclaims that when it gathers in

Jesus' name, Christ himself is present. For the community of faith united in our faith in Christ, Jesus is the Spirit of the Great Commandment, who empowers us to live that love out in and through the church when we pray, in Jesus name.

When I first came to this valley, I was amazed how nice people were, not just to me but to one another. Everyone seemed to know and love everyone else, like one big family. After a full year hanging out beyond the walls of the church, I now see that our valley community is more complex than my initial impression.

May the way we treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ be a witness to our life together as the body of Christ, to the glory of God. Amen.