

September 4, 2011
 Sermon for The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
 St Peter Lutheran Church
 Bowie, TX
 Larry Knobloch, Pastor
 Matthew 18:15-20

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³ and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷ “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! ⁸ And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire. ¹⁰ “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. ¹² What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

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¹ *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001

Grace, Mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Amen.

Our text leads us into familiar territory...the law ... and especially as we see it in our brothers and sisters around us.

The Lord's instructions in this text are clear, but all too often the Lord's people fail to follow through with these instructions. Oh, were real good at finding someone else's sins and throwing them in their face. Matthew 18 is often used as a hammer. Hammering someone with the law, well that's what it says here... *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault,"* Take that hammer in there and beat him or her about the head!!!

But think of yourself, if someone comes at you with a hammer, raining blows down on you, what would you do? Well the first two things on my list would either be to run or to FIGHT!

But is that really what we are after? Well, this holds true with Matthew 18 also. If you bust the door down, ready to slap someone with the law, you might be prepared to look for a return slap, and once it gets into a shouting match of blame, or "your sins are bigger than mine", have you really gained anything other than elevated blood pressure? Because remember, we are all sinners. Luke 6:42 tells us: *"How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? ..."*

But our sins do not disqualify us from speaking to our erring brother. Jesus told His sinful disciples, which includes us, to “go” and do this. We go as forgiven sinners, but sinners nonetheless. Again not to beat our brother, but to reach out in love, to pull them back into the fold of Christ.

Remember who we are talking about here. The text says “brother”. It is an all inclusive “brother” meaning a brother or sister in the Lord, a fellow member of the body of Christ! But all too often, just as within our earthly families, we are much harder on our brother and sisters, that we would be on a stranger.

Now that doesn’t mean that we let open and unrepentant sins fall to the wayside, Jesus tells us to address them, but it is a question of how we address them.

Looking at Paul, who dealt with so many erring brothers and sisters in congregations in the early Church. He told the church of Galatia:

“¹ Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Gal. 6:1-2)

And to the Ephesians he said that we should act: *“² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph 4:2-3)*

Always, always coming to them in love. Again, we don’t overlook their sin, but we try to bring them back in gently saying “yes, you have sinned...but here, give it to Christ and have complete forgiveness through faith in Him as your Savior”

Invite them to repent and let go of their sin, inviting them back into the body of Christ. As Jesus Himself said: *“If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”*

Our sole purpose is to regain our brother. No to show how good we are, or how big a person we are “cause we tried to turn them from their evil ways...” and if they don’t listen, to bad for them, now we can talk bad about them.”

No, again, our purpose is to regain the lost sheep of Christ. We have been given this task, and just as Jesus loves us, He loves them too, and yearns to have them repent and turn from their sins.

Yet all too often, we as sinful human being ourselves stop at the first step of Matthew 18. Oh we make an attempt at taking the second step, we get the two or three others, maybe make a half hearted attempt to rebuke as a group, but again, our sinful nature takes a hold and rather than working as a group to regain the brother or sister, it’s just a lot more fun to talk amongst ourselves about that person...yes, we gossip, and sometimes it seems like men enjoy it better than women. It’s so much more fulfilling to lift ourselves up as holier than thou, (or at least that person that no longer comes to church because she did that thing...but don’t tell nobody). Its much easier to do that than to truly follow Matthew 18.

Following Matthew 18, we should constantly be in prayer. Before we go and see them the first time, we should be praying not only about our visit, but about the outcome, earnestly praying that the lost be brought back. When we go as a group, its not because there is physical strength in numbers, but because as Jesus tells us in verse 19,

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

There is spiritual power in numbers as we all pray for the same thing. We pray that the Holy Spirit will work through our words to touch the sinner’s heart. And if we pray earnestly and in confidence, God will hear our prayer and if it is within His will, the prayer will be granted. Again, Christ’s Words from our text today: *“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”*

The final step of Matthew 18, is a sad, sad step to take. Very seldom does it come about, but God has given the Church the keys to Heaven, and sometimes the door must be shut and locked. For a truly repentant sinner, the door is always open...but for an openly un-repentant sinner, who has resisted all contact and calls to repentance, we, as the Church, are sometimes called to close and lock it. We don’t want to, we don’t like to but Jesus tells us to do it.

In His own Words we are told: *“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”*

An excommunication is not only sad, but we should be horrified whenever it takes place, even the thought of it should give us pause. Excommunication is removing someone from the means of God’s Grace, found in His Church, condemning them to the judgment of God, and outside of Christ, there is nothing but hell and eternal damnation. The total absence of God is even more horrible than we could even imagine.

Back in 1981, at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Houston, when I went through confirmation classes, one of my study mentors from the congregation told me that she thought that we should never excommunicate anyone because it's as if we are giving up on them. As I learned from Pastor Kelm, as well as through my own study since then, giving up is the last thing that we are doing.

Part of the reason that Church Discipline is such a hard thing to do is because we are yearning for the lost sheep to repent. We want so much to welcome them back that it hurts...mentally and yes physically. We begin to feel guilty, as the devil whispers into our ears..."well if you would have tried harder, or prayed harder, if you would have only smiled or shook their hand the last time you saw them...then they wouldn't have left the church, besides, you have done some pretty bad things yourself." How do I know this? Because he whispers them in my ears too.

This is why we try our best to follow Matthew 18 through. Not to punish our erring brothers and sisters, but to wake them up to the seriousness of unrepentant sin, to lead them to repentance and faith.

At any stage of church discipline, we should be ready to stop all actions and upon their changing their ways, confessing and repenting their sins, to welcome them back into full and loving communion with fellow believers and repentant, forgiven sinners, in the body of Christ. As Paul again tells us in 2 Corinthians 2: ⁶ *For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough,* ⁷ *so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.* ⁸ *So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.*"

So as we look towards, the painful task of church discipline, let us remember the final words of Paul from our Epistle: ⁸ *Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.* ⁹ *For the commandments, ... are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* ¹⁰ *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."* (Romans 13:8-10)

Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Amen.