

15th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 18A
Sermon 9.6.26

Matthew 18:15-20

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 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. If the member 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. 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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (178)

Matthew is alone in imagining the church. Of all four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Matthew is alone in imagining such a thing as the church. He's alone in using the word that would translate, “church.” *Ekklesia*, it is in Greek, which could also be understood as assembly or gathering.

True, the church shows up in the Book of Acts, which is the sequel book to the Gospel of Luke. True, then, the writer of Luke witnesses the church in its earliest forms and calls it such: “church.” But Matthew is alone among the gospels proper in imagining the church, furthermore in imagining Jesus as imagining the church, something he meant to leave in the world as his legacy, as his mystical body filled with his same Holy Spirit and set about to do the same works of good news.

Even here, though, it only features twice.

First is when Jesus has just prior foretold his fate, that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. This had his disciple Peter rebuking him, sternly saying, “God forbid it, Lord, this must never happen to you!”

But Jesus had figured it was time to start telling them, time to make it clear how this whole journey for Jesus would end, or would apparently end. He'd figured they were ready to hear it, ready for their having seen so much so far, and for most lately seeing the

Transfiguration on that storied mountain top, which moved them to understand that he was the Messiah.

What, however, they didn't understand is what the Messiah was truly to be in the world. Not a great warrior, not a domineering militant here to stage a revolution against the Roman Empire and all such empires, but here to inaugurate the reign of God in the world, which is necessarily not violent, which is necessarily not revolutionary, a turning of the tables though tables set just the same, but is necessarily a transformation, a *metanoia* of the ways of the world, so that subverting all conflict would be forgiveness, so that undoing all hostility would be compassion, so that relieving all resentment would be redemption: this is the true Messiah of God.

Which Jesus knew. And which Jesus moreover knew would require him to take on the violence of the world, the resentment of the mob, the domineering of the powers and principalities, to take it all on and in, and to transform it, and to release anew, as forgiveness and peace. Jesus knew this, and he perhaps figured the disciples also knew this, having confessed him as the Messiah that this is what the Messiah is to be.

But they didn't know. Not yet. So Peter pushed back: "God forbid it, Lord!" likely believing that the priority here is Jesus preserving his own life, which though would require violence because saving your own skin almost always involves tossing someone else into harm's way; Peter believing that the most important thing here is Jesus *not* suffering, Jesus *not* dying, though which would simply shunt such things onto others (in a world where it's kill or be killed)--which urge for shunting which might have had Jesus a little frustrated because he had just declared that on Peter, this *petra* of a man, this rock, would be built Jesus' church.

And yet here Peter was wrong on so fundamental a thing. So...

"Not yet," he might have concluded when Peter pushed back on the needfulness of Jesus' suffering, Jesus taking on the sin of the world, our violence and resentment. "Not yet," he might have concluded about Peter being ready to serve as the foundation of the church. There's more work to be done here, more instruction to offer these students, these disciples not yet fully disciplined in the way of God, the radically non-violent way of God.

But Jesus didn't give up on the idea of the church. He didn't give up on the idea that people, mere people, might be entrusted as this physical body, might be entrusted as the

house of the Holy Spirit in the world, and its vehicle by whose hands and hearts might be made real the realm of God in the world. He would mention the church again just two chapters later, here again and only here, and in the context of the likelihood that there would be conflict in its midst, that members of the church would even likely sin and sin against one another.

Oh, did you think our task here was to all get along? Did you think our personal aims here were all to be nice?

The manuscripts aren't clear on this, whether it's a matter of another member sinning or another member sinning "against you." Usually translated as Jesus saying, "If another member of the church sins against you..." the earliest manuscripts don't have "...against you..." rather just read, "If another member of the church sins..." such that the harmful behavior Jesus is concerned with among the church doesn't have to be pointed, doesn't have to be interpersonal, in order to be something you might object to. It just has to be an act of sin,

which itself begs so many questions. We might think we know what "sin" is. We might think we know what "sins" are. But I'd say a lot of bad theological thinking stems from too facile an understanding of what is meant by the biblical concept of sin, which is itself not a singular and settled concept but is one each book of the Bible seems to understand slightly differently.

One thing does seem consistent, though: that sin is a condition in the created order. It is a quality of the creation that is interwoven into all things. Pervasive, it is often understood to be: the utter pervasiveness of sin.

Which sounds grim.

Which sounds condemning—and which might make us defensive, as if we're being accused of something, something we didn't do, something we at least didn't *mean* to do.

Both of which are likely often true: sin is something we didn't do, and is something we didn't intend. Really, the fact of sin, and the speaking of it, isn't to suggest our fault, full stop. As a quality amidst the creation pervading all aspects of the creation, every part and particle and even the interwoven entirety, sin is something that ensnares and that we might engage, even willfully engage, which only then are we accountable for in some way. So,

urged to turn from it, urged rather to pursue the good, we are though never safe from sin, full stop—not until the end of the age, not until we abide in glory with God.

There are some people who believe otherwise. There are some people who believe, if you confess Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, then you are saved from sin and therefore, going forward, somehow incapable of participating in it. But this isn't true. This, sad to say, doesn't bear out. Sin is, to borrow a phrase from the Gospel of Luke, always looking for an opportune time, which opportunity is never greater than when you think you're all good.

And what is characteristic of sin is death, destruction. How you can tell sin from righteousness is how directly might come of certain acts and phenomena death, destruction, as distinct from life, from creative hope—

distinct, if not clearly, unmistakably distinct. For we will never fully separate out what creates from what destroys. We will never clearly distinguish what is good from what is evil. There's an intertwining here that will confuse us as often as not. And this is the pervasiveness of sin, whose characteristics are death, destruction—but for which we are not wholly responsible, for which we are not wholly accountable. We are not to blame for sin except to the degree that we engage it or participate in it, which will always be to some degree.

This is the tragedy of life amidst the created order.

The comedy of it, for what it's worth, is that a happy ending awaits all things, a new creation wherein God is the all in all.

Meanwhile, though, when another member of the church sins, even sins against you, here's what to do. Because such a thing is inevitable. Such sinning, even interpersonal sinning, or perhaps especially interpersonal sinning, is all but inevitable, an occurrence that can't be avoided.

Which I tell you as one who's tried. When I can't take another little injury, whether one I've received or one I've inflicted, when I'm full up on the bruises of any given day, I figure I'll just stop talking, I'll just stop trying, I'll just sink into myself because in the quiet closet of my own soul is at least one place where the chaffing will ease.

But even this wears.

Even withdrawing wears relationships thin, because the mere fact of withholding myself nurses the wound, rehearses its power, the very opposite of relief or rest, to say nothing of restoration, redemption.

Sadly, it seems the case that wherever two or more are gathered, there is the likelihood of engaging sin. Whether born of miscommunication or exhaustion or irritation or resentment or vengeance or cruelty, old wounds that didn't heal or new wounds inflicted because what one person needs the other person doesn't know to provide or can't provide or won't provide because there's no reserve of effort at the end of a long day, just as wherever two or more are gathered in God's name, there is God, so too wherever two or more gathered there is the likelihood of destruction, whether severe or mild. Entropy, let's call it. Interpersonal entropy: simply a law of being a person, a blunt and unavoidable fact which then requires some intentional attempt at rehabilitation.

Which is this: say what you feel, tell the person who provoked the feeling. Say what you see; tell the person whom you're seeing. Name how sin has been itched and irritated to life—and maybe, just maybe, in naming it, find relief.

If not, then bring two or three others who share the hope of restoration, even share the need for restoration because relationships aren't so disposable a thing, and the church as a web of relationships is starting to seem (to Jesus, at least) essential, the thing the world will need once he is gone, the thing of healing and hope that the world will need once he is gone.

And allowing it only works for so long. Whether personally or socially, allowance of destruction, whether one-time or ongoing, only works for so long.

A recent article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Seattle is in focus, a place where the harm-reduction model of addressing substance abuse has been given a hearty try. The article is entitled, "The Cities that Said Yes to Drugs." Of drug decriminalization done in the hope that people addicted, no longer fearful of police action, will eventually seek out their own wellness, Michael Powell writes and the subtitle explains: "Policies that gave addicts clean needles and places to use drugs were intended to reduce harm. They created a 'zombie apocalypse.'"

Powell goes on to describe city parks and playgrounds abandoned to drug self-administration and paraphernalia waste, people rocking through their latest high and

sleeping off their eventual withdrawal before seeking out another trip. Children are made to stay away from the swingsets erected for them. People steer clear of the lawns and plazas set out for broader recreation. A scene even the most idealistic bleeding heart (like me) would find horrifying, this calls to mind the sort of sin Jesus speaks of here, not something to be used to induce personal shame but something that is broadly itself a shame, that destroys wantonly because of a misguided decision not to stop it, not to consider it wrong, destructive, and worthy of being stopped, as best can be done, at least an attempt to be done: the people addicted are given over to and given up on.

Say what sin you see. Say what destruction you sense. Do it in the hope that it will find relief. Do it in the faith that what's eroded can be repaired, and do it in the church because of the promise that what's eroded *can* be repaired, renewed, indeed redeemed—or, when not in a practical sense, can at least be let go, graciously let go.

I think it's no mere coincidence according to Matthew that Jesus speaks of the church just as he speaks of his own crucifixion. Recognizing that he will be leaving, recognizing that he will moreover be leaving the world unfinished of his entirely bringing good news, unfinished of its utterly homing the reign of God, he brings into the discourse the imperative of the church, a living body commissioned to enact the reign of God in its midst. Whenever it gathers as church, whenever *we* gather as church, we're to enact the reign of God: which only becomes imperative when Jesus himself is known to be leaving, known in a certain sense to have left.

What we do here is a strange thing.

On the one hand, it's a familiar form. You see it in classrooms and concert halls the world over. There's authoritative teaching offered by one person or a few authorized people. There's a performance of certain arts or certain crafts—writing, music, architecture, food. There's preparation we've each undertaken, dressing up, putting on.

But there's a qualitative difference between other places where such things are done: theaters or performance halls, classrooms or lecture halls. Here we perform speech-acts or we aim to do: things that, by our saying them, they are so. When we pass the peace, we're not expressing a wish for peace, we're rather enacting peace. When we speak of the salvation of God, we're not fantasizing, we are realizing, making salvation in some if limited sense real. And when we call upon the Holy Spirit, we're not asserting an

authority outside of our own so we might take charge or dominate; rather we're seeking a filling so to enact a fulfilling, that we might go out into the world newly full of God's promise and empowered to realize in some way that promise unto a world that otherwise withers and despairs that life is hard, the struggle is real, and there's no reason for it and no release.

Here, there is to be release. Among us there is to be recognized reason for the struggle, and that reason is love: the chance to love, to express compassion and care; the reality of love's power and pleasure; the sustaining spirit of companionship and communion all in love.

As this old meeting house is to be reset for all sorts of gatherings, as was the case long ago, an historic meeting house built not only to house the church but also countless other sorts of assemblies, we'll have an interesting opportunity to sense the difference.

Most gatherings of people have an explicit task, the "first thing" that brings them together. To hear a concert, to discuss a book, to learn at a lecture, to celebrate a birthday, these are tasks that commonly bring people together.

But the church is something else. Our "first thing" is to abide together and to love, to care for one another and to let ourselves be cared for. And what we do following from that "first thing" might very much resemble all those other things—book clubs, lectures, and the like. But the primary task explicitly stated is to be together, to gather so to be one body of many members, which is, by the Holy Spirit present in our midst, the mystical body of the Risen Christ.

And, to be certain, this doesn't safeguard us from sinning or even from sinning against one another. On the contrary, when you remove the immediate task of a group, you remove the thing that makes their gathering less personal, which is also less risky. If we can busy ourselves with the task at hand, then it doesn't really matter that you hurt my feelings a month ago, and I sort of think you meant to, or that I hurt your feelings and I didn't even notice. When we're gathered to perform some certain task, we can set such interpersonal sin aside. We have more important things to do than to worry about one another's feelings.

Not so here. Here this is what we're about, worrying about one another's feelings, taking care of one another through injury and hope, through defeat and renewal. We do this because this is what the world needs, paths back from injury, ways out of exchanged

harm. Light to appeal when the darkness of vengeance has gravitation pull. Hope to enact when violence is massive and waiting at the door for an opportune time. We do this because this is what the world the needs, and we do this on so small a scale as can fit in this small sanctuary because that's where salvation happens, even world-transforming salvation, wherever two or three are gathered, so small a thing as easy to discount, so immediate and powerful a thing that many would avoid.

You know, they say these days one dynamic in our increasingly polarized society is the emptying out of the mainline churches, places where polarization meets reconciliation.

We're still here, and we're accepting new members.

To be this close, to be so in one another's care: this is the church.

Thanks be to God.