



Pentecost 15 (A) – Proper 18

[RCL]: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

When Someone Sins Against You

Today's Gospel reading merits a bit of investigation—it needs to be mined to find the gold.

First of all, some notes about the text. This passage appears only in Matthew—and it's only in Matthew that we hear Jesus use the word “church”—so it probably holds a bit of an anachronism. The word “church” cues us that this passage likely attributes to Jesus a teaching on church discipline developed in the first century to deal with problems in Matthew's infant church. Since it's clearly built on Jesus's own values and teachings, Matthew has no problem putting it on Jesus's lips. It sure fits there. With that in mind, let's listen to the first part again. Jesus said:

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. (Matt. 18:15-17)

These are rules for when folks get mad at each other. They're a little like parts of our Diocesan and Church Canons: They provide a quasi-legal procedure for dealing with problems amongst the members. One constant about the early church is that it faced plenty of internal challenges. So, folks needed a way of dealing with them. This process is presented as a way of handling some of these problems—a way that they understood as having the authority of Jesus behind it. It has provisions for charges, investigations, two levels of appeal, and, finally, there's even a sentence of excommunication.

Now, these are not our official rules today. They can easily be abused—and have been abused—when applied directly in our modern world. We now have our own processes, both formal and informal, for dealing with problems, and the centuries have brought changes in how we approach them. (By the way, the Episcopal Church’s procedures for excommunication are on page 409 in the prayer book. It’s right there; it’s clearly inspired in part by this passage; and it’s rarely used.)

As much as times have changed, there remains a lot of wisdom in these few verses. And the values behind them, if not the details, make sense for living together, not only in the church today, but most anywhere else.

Perhaps the best way into this passage is by looking at some of the things that Jesus *doesn’t* say. First of all, he doesn’t say, “If someone sins against you, you should sulk, pout, moan, make everyone else miserable, call your lawyer and swear before God and anybody else around that you’ll have nothing to do with that no good so-and-so until he or she crawls up to you begging your totally undeserved forgiveness.” He doesn’t say you should flood social media with accusations, light up the phone lines, send out a flock of e-mails, tweets, and Facebook posts, use AI to create cruel memes, whisper vile things about the offender, move to another church, or call the bishop. Jesus doesn’t say to do any of that. Instead, he says that if you are wronged, if you are the one hurt, then you are the one who needs to take the initiative for forgiveness and reconciliation. Even if, maybe especially if, it isn’t your fault in the first place. That’s what Jesus says. The first step in your search for forgiveness and reconciliation comes from *you*—even if that doesn’t seem fair.

In fact, Jesus’s teachings on forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoring relationships *never* seem fair. He always asks us to do more than we know we should. In fact, it is in the very next verse that Jesus tells Peter to forgive, not 7 times but 7 times 70.

We also need to remember that Jesus doesn’t insist that we act this way because doing this will automatically make the other person either act better or feel guilty, and he doesn’t say that the reason for acting this way is that it works all of the time or even most of the time. Instead, Jesus tells us to act this way because this is how God acts toward us, and we need to imitate God in our own lives. As faithful people, our behavior needs to reveal to the world what God is like. Because, like it or not, we’re one way the world has to learn what God is like.

So, the first value that emerges from these dusty old rules has to do with our taking the initiative, with our making the first move toward reconciliation, no matter whose fault it is, no matter what we think is the fair thing to do. As with some other things Jesus says, we don’t have to like it, but we do have to do it. Or, at the very least, we need to take what Jesus says very, very seriously.

The second value is like unto it. The next couple of steps in this process involve appeals within and to the church. So, if the problem remains after trying to work it out individually, others are supposed to become involved to help bring about reconciliation.

There is a value at work here that we can have a hard time with these days. It’s a value that insists that the common good—the overall health and quality of the community, the family, the group—

has a strong positive claim on us. Seeking such common good takes priority over our own satisfaction, our anger, or our sense of what we deserve.

When somebody sins against you—when there is trouble and conflict—it’s not just the two (or more) people most directly involved whose welfare is at stake. The relevant communities’ welfare is at stake in how things are handled. So, if the problem remains after trying to work it out individually, it becomes a concern for the community. For sure, what that looks like these days may well be different, but the point is very important. Trouble within the community is something that affects the whole community.

Again, we tend to have a problem with this way of thinking these days. Everything we see and hear in the culture around us seems to shout out that we, as isolated individuals, are the primary focus, the primary reality, the primary source of meaning and of value.

Jesus suggests otherwise. He suggests that “we” comes before “me.” What an odd thought. It’s worth pondering a bit.

Those are just two of the values involved in this ancient bit of church discipline. First, we need take the initiative in reconciliation, no matter what seems fair; and, second, the good of the whole community, is a central impetus for this. Now, there’s a lot more going on in this early process of church discipline, and it might be worth taking a minute this week to look for them.

Before you do, one final word: The last part of this process might sound grim to us. We read that if someone refuses to listen “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” This word can seem extreme—until we remember that the Church’s ministry of love, evangelism, reconciliation, and hope is for people outside of it, people like Gentiles and tax collectors. After all, Jesus had some important followers who were Gentiles, and there is an ancient tradition that Matthew was himself a tax collector. The welfare, healing, and salvation of all matter; the church serves those who are inside and those who are outside the faith.

These principles, these values, which guided the Church of the first several centuries are worth knowing; they’re worth paying attention to; they’re worth working on—even if our details can be different from their details. These values—this broad vision of life and of living—can point us toward the way of Jesus and his immediate community. And that, we know, is the way of life.

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