

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (a)

Ezekiel 33:7-11 Romans 13:8-14 Matthew 18:15-20

St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH

September 5-6, 2020 (Traditional)

Today's gospel is a tough one. Let's review this four-step process Jesus gives us for dealing with conflict in the church. Number one, go directly to the person in private and talk to them openly and honestly. If that doesn't result in a two-way conversation, go to step two: involve one or two other people in the process. Another person can serve as a mediator, or at least as a witness, to make sure everyone's being honest, including yourself. If whatever hurtful behavior continues, go to step three: Make it a public, open issue so that the poison of rumors and gossip don't spread in the Body. Finally, if nothing else works, as Jesus says, step four: let that person be to you "as a pagan or tax collector." He's not saying, now you can be mean or contemptuous towards them. Step four means *let go of them*. Let go, because you've done steps 1-3...you've done all you can. It's all out in the open. Satan does most of his work in hiding. After steps 1-3, even if the problems persist, at least they've been chased out of the bushes.

Now, our first instinct when we get hurt, or don't like what we're hearing, is to jump immediately to step number four—we want to excommunicate people from our lives, demonize them, tear them down on Facebook. But Jesus makes it clear that *in the church*, you can't skip to number 4 without doing steps 1-3. Only then can you say, "I've done my best." You haven't demonized them—you've given them every

opportunity to set **you** straight. With steps 1-3, you've shown a courageous willingness to admit that you might be the one in the wrong. The whole gist of what Jesus is giving us here is, we're not trying to end up with winners and losers: Jesus pushes us to get to the truth beneath the conflict.

It's worth pointing out that Jesus is talking about relationships *within the church* here. This is consistent in the New Testament. As believers, even though we fail all the time, we still hold ourselves to God's standards of behavior. We follow Matthew 18 no matter the situation: in our families, at work. But when it comes to our expectations of people *outside the church*, Paul's attitude, for example, is basically: don't expect them to do things the way Christians do. Why would we assume people who follow a master other than Jesus would think the same way morally as we do? We gotta let that go—expecting the world outside the church to follow Matthew 18—if we're going to be effective missionaries for Jesus, especially in today's world.

Back to today's gospel: it contains some of the most specific instructions Jesus gives us anywhere about how to behave in a certain situation. I can tell you from personal experience: following Jesus' procedure works. One year into my call at my congregation in Connecticut, one of the members started badmouthing the church and its lay leaders in public. He never went straight to the people who had made him angry. He was gossiping and spreading rumors about people behind their backs. And he was not letting it go; he nursed his anger into a poisonous hatred. For two months I did nothing. You know, I figured people can figure out pretty quickly not to take this

guy seriously. But one day, some of my parishioners told me, “pastor, we were out with this guy in public last weekend, and you need to talk to him. He’s hurting the church.” He was lying; he was twisting the facts in a certain way so that people unfamiliar with the situation didn’t know what to believe. He was damaging the trust of the congregation, twisting people’s perceptions of the church.

So now I had to do something, five years out of seminary—my first year of being a solo pastor. And I was this super nice, sweet as pie midwestern boy—such an innocent angel—having to deal with a 65 year-old Yankee on the warpath. I did not want to deal with it. It kept me up at night. I got so angry. I fantasized about using his own tactics against him; I thought about all these different ways I could strategically talk about him behind his back, humiliate him in public. The devil was working on me.

But I knew I had to put my personal feelings aside for the good of the congregation. I looked at our church constitution and found the procedure that Jesus gives us in today’s gospel, directly from Matthew 18. St. John’s has the same section in its constitution. And I followed Jesus’ procedure. I planned it all out, how it would happen, steps one through four. I assumed it was all going to be horrible. Sure enough, step one didn’t work, when I went to him directly. He acted like nothing was happening. But thankfully it turned out we only had to go to step 2. In the presence of 2 other witnesses, I revealed to him everything I had heard he had said and done, with dates and times, and I simply asked him: “is all this true?”

He was so shocked and mortified that we were following Matthew 18 with him! He wept and apologized and never caused any problems ever again. In fact, in the next 8 years, this man and I developed a sincere affection for each other. We loved each other. But even if it hadn't turned out so well...and it doesn't always turn out so well...following Matthew 18 is the right thing to do. It's Jesus' way.

One thing Matthew 18 shows you when you follow it is your own sinfulness. Like I said, I dreaded every step of having to go through it with that man. Who wants to have to talk with someone directly about difficult issues? It's humbling: you have to put yourself out there and risk getting hurt. *You* might find out you're the one in the wrong. Because *they* have a chance to show you something you'd missed. They're able to speak for themselves. That's what Jesus is enabling everyone to do with Matthew 18. It's a lot easier to badmouth the person publicly (on social media, for example). Our modern world makes it easier than ever to skip Jesus' procedure for dealing with conflict. Everyone's excommunicating each other before any real conversation happens.

But today's kind of excommunication doesn't work. Without steps one through three, that Jesus gives us, nothing will ever change. Everyone will just keep drinking the poison. There's a terrible trend in today's world where millions of people are defining themselves by their hatreds; as in "who I hate is what makes me a unique person." It's

Satanic, because when we define ourselves by our hatreds, the person we hate is actually exercising a subtle, long-lasting power over us. We put ourselves under the power of a false Lord.

It is *hard* to follow Matthew chapter 18. Absolutely it is. But of course, as with everything Jesus teaches us about how to act and live in this world, it's about experiencing lasting joy and freedom in this life. He teaches us good stuff like Matthew 18 not so we can save ourselves with it. He saved us. But he gives us solid food like Matthew 18 so we can have true, lasting joy and freedom here and now in everyday life.

The question that always helps me the most when I'm in conflict is: "who is my ruler here?" Is the real king going to be my ruler — the one who hung on a cross for my sins, and who was raised to give me a new life? Or is that guy over there who gossips and says nasty things about people behind their backs — is he going to rule my actions here? Which one will I serve here?

Bottom line, as a Christian I know that I can choose to be a conqueror, rather than a slave! I've got the same fears and temptations as everyone else in this world, the same mixed motivations. As I stumble and fall and experience sleepless nights, at least I know what the path to victory looks like. I know exactly who is calling me into God's

future, into the fullness of life. As a believer in Jesus, now I have a real choice. We don't have to go the easy way: we don't have to be slaves to our emotions, our petty need to put others beneath us.

It's passages like today's gospel, Matthew 18 that—if we follow them—are going to set Christians visibly apart from the rest of the world more and more, as times are changing. The world is not following Matthew 18. What a privilege it is for us to be able to show the world a much better way, a way of freedom, a way of forgiveness and life. Following Matthew 18 is just another down-to-earth way to embody the gospel as a fact in our lives...a fact that people *see*. They see us acting differently towards each other, and towards them. And that's always going to make people curious. It's just another way we can open the door, so that everyone can see the victorious Lord we follow.