

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
September 7, 2014  
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Ezekiel 33:1-11  
Psalm 119:33-40  
Romans 12:9-21  
Matthew 18:15-20

Brothers and sisters, the kind of life that Jesus calls us to in his Church is not an idealized, romanticized life. It is a life filled with opportunities for learning to love our brothers and sisters as ourselves, and learning to love God above all. It is growth toward what John Wesley termed “perfect love,” the love of God ruling our tempers, our actions, our attitudes, and our motives. Such love is what binds the Church together, and ultimately convinces the world that Christ is ours, and we are his.

This love is most often manifested in *forgiveness*, for the simple reason that we screw up. Whether out of insecurity, bad training, or habit, we all too often put *our* wants, needs, and desires ahead of those of others. We can be selfish. We can be insensitive. We can be stubborn and proud. The result is that sometimes we hurt the people around us, and they hurt us. Authentic Christian community is often messy, and painful.

This reality is not just a feature of the modern day church. It goes way back, back as far as when Matthew writes his Gospel to his faith community. Then

– as well as now—people in the church hurt one another. In such cases, what did they do? What do *we* do today? How does the Body of Christ stay healthy when things get messy and relationships become strained and even severed?

Jesus' words here can help us. But we must not oversimplify them. It's easy to read his words and see them purely as a recipe for dealing with troublesome Christians. Step one: take the offender aside and show him/her the error of his/her ways. Step two: bring a group to confront the said offender. Step three: banish the unrepentant offender. Repeat as necessary.

Very tidy and very formulaic. But this reading of Jesus' words fails to take seriously the larger context in which Matthew writes. The context of chapter 18, and of the wider Gospel, makes one thing abundantly clear: *God values forgiveness and restored relationship more than being "right" and scoring points.*

Just prior to our text this morning, Jesus tells the story about how God is like a shepherd who will leave 99 sheep to themselves in order to go and to search for one sheep who is lost. That's how much God desires to draw us each into the loving arms of His mercy and forgiveness.

And subsequent to our text, Peter asks Jesus how many times he must forgive a brother who sins against him. Depending on who you consulted, the

typical answer was that 3 times was a good rule of thumb. So Peter attempts to be generous in his answer when he asks Jesus if seven times is sufficient.

Jesus' answer to Peter of "seventy times seven" is nonsensical, both to Peter and to us. But the point seems to be that Peter is to forgive that brother *as many times as it takes to love him back into right relationship*.

God, it seems, is concerned with forgiveness and restored relationship, not with being "right."

When we rebelled against God and went our own way, God could have washed His hands of us and just walked away. But He did not. The words of our liturgy say it well: "When we had fallen into sin and became subject to death, God sent His only Son Jesus Christ to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us unto Himself."

All of us like sheep have gone astray. But none of us has wandered for too long when on the horizon we see the form of the shepherd, making his way to us, throwing us onto his shoulders, and carrying us home.

That reality provides a new set of lenses through which we can read Jesus' words here in our passage. Jesus invites us to love each other enough to be proactive when relationships are strained. He invites us to go and to speak not just *to* another person who has hurt us, but to speak *with* that person. He invites us to hold one another accountable by *vulnerability*, not by *force*. It takes grace, but

Jesus calls on us to speak to those who we feel have wronged us without judging them, putting them down, or taking responsibility for their actions.

In this way, the primary goal is not to change someone else's behavior, or to demonstrate how that person is wrong. The goal is to restore the damaged relationship by speaking truthfully about the breach or hurt you are experiencing. You take responsibility for your feelings and your actions, and you invite the other person to do the same.

But here is the key to all of it: *We value and seek restored relationship above being "right" and scoring points.*

Early in my first pastoral assignment, I made a pastoral call one day to a lady in our congregation. In the course of our conversation, which I thought was routine, I said something that greatly offended this woman. Nothing was said, however, and I went about my day.

A few hours later, the phone in my study rang. On the other end of the line was another lady from our congregation, a friend to the woman I had just visited. She informed me that I had greatly offended this woman, and that she was leaving the church.

Laying aside the fact that the offended woman should have come to me herself, I got in my car and immediately drove back to her home. I apologized for

offending her, and asked her to forgive me. She did, but soon thereafter she and her husband disappeared from church, and were gone for more than two years.

This was painful for me, because I was truly sorry for causing *her* pain, and my apology had been totally sincere.

About two days before we moved from that community, this dear lady appeared at my door. She had come to tell me that she was sorry, that even though she knew my apology had been sincere, she could not release the anger and bitterness she had felt against me. But she knew that she could not allow me to leave the community without making things right between us. Happily, true reconciliation occurred that day.

The church can be a messy place at times. The body of Christ is filled with folks who are carrying emotional scars that cut deep, and mental baggage far too heavy for most folks to be carrying. We are wounded, broken, hurting people. Sometimes we wound and hurt others. At other times others hurt and wound us.

In those times, the Holy Spirit wants to empower us with grace to walk *toward* others rather than *away* from them. The Spirit gives us grace to value and seek *restored relationship* more than being *right*. For this is exactly how God acts toward us.

Because of this, I've now had to change the way I view Jesus' statement, "if two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you."

Early in my life I thought that these words of Jesus were a magic formula for peace and prosperity. Just find another Christian, decide what you want, and "presto," there you have it. I now believe differently. Perhaps what Jesus is saying here is that when we cultivate the kind of community that is characterized by forgiveness and restored relationship, *anything is possible*.

That's exactly how I felt that day on the front porch of a parsonage in a tiny town in Illinois.

And it's often how I feel when we come to the Lord's Table, and we receive these symbols of bread and wine that speak to us of a God who seeks to be in relationship with us more than proving Himself to be right.

So come with faith. Receive His gift of grace. Be reconciled to God, and to one another.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.