

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
September 10, 2017  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

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

In both our Old Testament and Gospel lessons this morning, the texts *presume* something that may be very difficult for us moderns to accept and to understand. In both cases, the texts speak about a *duty* and an *obligation* to correct sinners in the midst of the Christian community.

In our Old Testament lesson, Ezekiel is appointed as a watchman over the house of Israel. And he is even told that if he fails to speak out or fails to try to correct wayward persons, he will be accountable for the souls of his fellow Israelites.

And just as Ezekiel is appointed watchman over the house of Israel, so Jesus in our Gospel lesson establishes his apostles as *spiritual guardians* of the New Israel of God, or the *Church*. (Note the Apostle Paul's words to the Galatians, where he calls the Church the "Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16).

Building on laws prescribed by Moses under the Old Covenant (cf. Deut. 19:13; Lev. 19:17-20), Jesus invests his apostles with authority to "bind" and to "loose" in his name, and says that the decisions they make on earth are sanctioned

in heaven. The terms “bind” and “loose” are technical terms that have their origin in ancient Judaism, and they point to the reality that there was an established authority to deal with issues of transgression within the faith community, and to effect reconciliation within the community.

This may be difficult for us moderns to swallow, but behind it lies the truth that sin is not just a private matter between an individual and God. Sin affects community, and because of that the community is given responsibility for addressing it. Furthermore, it is *within* the faith community where Jesus is found, guiding and helping that very community.

So, the texts seem to presume a duty on the part of the Church to confront and correct persons who have sinned against fellow Christians. The question is: *How is this to be done?*

I think that the context may help us a great deal here, especially if we look at the material that immediately precedes and follows our Gospel lesson.

Just before our lesson, Jesus tells the story about how God is like a shepherd who will leave 99 sheep to themselves in order to go and look for the one wandering sheep who has gone astray. That’s how much God desires to draw us into His loving arms of mercy and forgiveness.

And immediately following our lesson, Jesus responds to Peter’s question about the nature of forgiveness, and how many times he should forgive a brother

who sins against him. Standard teaching on the subject was that three times was a good number. Peter, probably trying to curry favor with Jesus, proposes *seven* times as a good solution. And to his shock, Jesus counters Peter's offer by saying: "Not seven, but seventy times seven!" The point of this outlandish answer is that Peter is to forgive the sinning brother *as many times as it takes to love him back into right relationship*.

The upshot of these two pieces of context seems to be that foremost in the mind of God when it comes to people is their healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. God's primary agenda is not to "prove a point," or to score points, or to engage in judgment or condemnation. God's primary agenda is *reconciliation*, the healing of relationships.

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.*

The church can be a messy place at times. The body of Christ is filled with folks who are bearing emotional scars that cut deeply, and carrying 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*.

The reason that anything is possible is because Jesus is in the midst of that community. And where Jesus is, anything is possible – especially healed and restored relationships.

As we come to the Lord's Table, let us come with humility. Most importantly, if you are experiencing strain or stress in a relationship with a brother or sister, ask for grace to walk *toward* that brother or sister in love, to share your heart, and to seek reconciliation. If you do, you will sense a power walking with you, the power of the One who left the safety and comfort of heaven to come walking *toward you*.

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