

14th Sunday After Pentecost

September 6, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹⁵ “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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

After reading and hearing our gospel text this morning, one may imagine that Jesus is at a hotel seminar, giving a motivational speech on his three-step process for achieving forgiveness and reconciliation between church members. Of course, the issue is that I have never met a church congregation that practices Jesus’ 3-step process as he laid out in the gospel of Matthew. To be truly honest, most of us, especially us Lutherans, don’t really want to stir the pot and cause trouble. So, to ask us to confront another person about their sin, seems scandalous to us.

I feel like most of us Christians, and perhaps human beings in general, don’t really want to deal with conflict. Of course, there are those who are exceptions to the rule and have no issues with confronting people when there is a problem. But, I’m guessing most of us try to do everything we can to avoid conflict and we get stressed and anxious when faced with a conflict we cannot avoid.

I know that, for myself, I am someone who gets really anxious and stressed when I know there is a conflict that I have to face. My instinct is to run away from conflict, even though I know I cannot do so. It takes a lot of courage and energy on my part to confront the conflict in question.



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But in addition to not wanting to stir the pot, sin can also be challenging to point out because sometimes it isn't clear to everyone if the action or choice is really a sin or not. Now, I'm not talking about the obvious sins like murder, stealing, adultery, and violence. What I am talking about, for example, is the fact that the church disagrees on certain things that some consider sinful and some don't.

For example, back in 2009 and 2010 many congregations left the ELCA because they truly felt that homosexuality is a sin. And while many congregations stayed in the ELCA, there is still division in this church about whether or not being gay is a sin. Some people think that saying certain swear words is a sin, while others think saying swear words are harmless. Some people think that being promiscuous before marriage is a sin, while others disagree. The point is that we all have differing opinions on what is "sinful" and that can make it difficult to confront the sin of another person.

Well, personally, I don't think Jesus said what he said in order to get the church to follow a certain set of guidelines when confronting a person's sin. Instead, what I think is the key to Jesus' gospel message has to do in the way we approach sin in general. But to fully understand what Jesus is getting at here in this gospel passage, we need to take a moment and define "sin."

In my study of theology and the bible, I understand sin to be anything that destroys the relationship between us and God. I also believe sin is anything that we do that intentionally causes us harm or causes harm to another person. Of course, sometimes we are unaware of how our words and actions may have caused harm to another person, or even to our relationship with God. That is why we say "...sins known and unknown" sometimes in our order of confession and forgiveness at the beginning of worship.

So, what is Jesus truly getting here with this gospel text today? Does Jesus really want us to go and point out the sin of every single member of the congregation? Well, the answer is no, and yes. Let me explain. What Jesus is truly getting at in this gospel text is that we as a church need to make sure we are being diligent in watching out for sinful behavior. But not just for certain individuals but the entire faith community and our secular community as well. In other words, Jesus doesn't want us to turn a blind eye when glaring sin is present in our midst. When we see oppression, when we see violence, when we see injustice, even if it will create conflict or upset our comfortable lives, Jesus calls us to speak out against the sin that is present in order to bring healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, and life-giving change.

Of course, Jesus knows that it is hard to speak up against sin by ourselves, that is why Jesus encourages the disciples to bring along others, and eventually get the whole church involved if



needed in order to fight the sin and bring about freedom from it. The church needs to speak out against injustice, violence, oppression, and anything else that harms the lives of any of God's beloved children. To turn a blind eye because it makes us uncomfortable is itself a sin.

But there is another part to Jesus' message in the gospel text today. When we confront the sin, it should be done with compassion and mercy, and it should definitely involve God. Jesus doesn't want us to point out the sin of another in order to give ourselves a false sense of righteousness or to do more harm to the person who has sinned. Jesus wants us to understand that, when we confront sin, it should be with an understanding that we are genuinely concerned and want the person or group to stop their destructive behavior so they can renew their relationship with God. In other words, the intention for pointing out sin should be in the hope that the person will have a repentant heart, receive God's forgiveness, and our forgiveness as well.

This is why Jesus wants God to be present in the decision to approach sin in order that healing, reconciliation, and change can occur. Jesus understands that approaching sin needs to be a communal act in the fact that it should be done grounded in prayer and discerning God's will. This is what Jesus means when he speaks of two or three being gathered together. Now, this doesn't mean triangulation. Communal doesn't mean sending someone else to deal with the person in your stead. Instead communal is referring to the fact that one should seek counsel in prayer and discernment when figuring out how to best confront the sin. It's a way for us to check ourselves and make sure that the love of God and love of neighbor is what is motivating us to seek reconciliation with another person or group.

Thankfully, because we have been freed from the powers of sin and death through Christ's death and resurrection, because we have experienced the amazing forgiveness of God, and because we know that we are God's beloved and all people are God's beloved, it isn't too difficult to find the motivation to want to spread the good news of God's forgiveness and help others come to understand that they are no longer in bondage to sin.

Now, we all know that pointing out sin can be a challenging thing in the fact that people don't like it when we point out their sin, even when we do it out of love. People don't like to think they are doing something wrong and often put up some kind of resistance. This is why it sometimes takes the action of a whole community to help point out the sin in love. But this is also why Jesus tells the disciples to treat anyone who keeps resisting as a gentile and a tax collector. Of course, when you read the gospels, you come to realize that Jesus never gave up on gentiles and tax collectors and continued to love them and minister to them. This means that no matter how much a person or group resists, we must never give up on them and continue to approach them with love.



Now, one thing I want to make clear here is that, while we never want to give up on a person or group when helping them turn away from their sin for the sake of freeing them from it so they can come to know the power of God's love in their lives, it cannot be at the cost of our own safety and wellbeing. In other words, if the relationship with another person or group becomes abusive or violent, it is not safe for us to continue in that relationship and it is okay to separate ourselves for the sake of our own wellbeing. Hopefully, reconciliation can still happen, but reconciliation doesn't necessarily mean we continue to be in an abusive relationship.

Ultimately, it is our mission as the church to proclaim the good news of God's love to all people and the world; it is our mission to proclaim repentance and forgiveness. And we do this grounded in God's love for us, knowing that we often fall short ourselves, but that God's love also brings us forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. And whether or not the other person or group comes to understand their sinful actions, by continuing to spread God's love in the world we will be helping God subdue the influence of sin and death, so that more and more people can come to know the freedom they have in God's forgiving love.

Amen.



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