

Pentecost 15-September 10, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Matthew 18:10-20

"Reason for Rejoicing" Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's gospel reading contains a couple very familiar, but also a couple of the most often misinterpreted and misunderstood words from Jesus. Without knowing the context that surrounds the words that were spoken by Jesus, we can easily cherry pick the words that we want to hear and use them to our benefit. Other denominations of faith and other stripes of Lutherans will also be hearing from Matthew 18 today, but some of these churches and pastors will back up to the very beginning of chapter 18 to get a more complete understanding of why Jesus spells out for us the steps to take as a church when dealing with members of the church who sin against others. If we were to begin with verse 15 today which says "When a member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault, it may sound like Jesus is giving us permission to do as the people who caught the woman in adultery and bring the sin out of the darkness and into the light so that as many people as possible can know the sin that has been committed and quickly move on to applying the appropriate punishment. But Jesus does not rejoice when a person is brought in front of others to have their sin exposed for many to see. Jesus instead rejoices when one person, one lamb of his flock, who has strayed away is found and forgiven for their sin.

Our scripture for today begins at verse 10 where Jesus begins his teaching about discipline in the church by saying that we should take care that you do not despise one of the little ones. The first step Jesus tells us to follow is to make sure that we are not the cause for provoking others to sin. Whenever Jesus was presented with a case about someone who has sinned, Jesus most often reveals the sin of the person who presents the sinner. He did this with the woman who was caught in adultery. Jesus never denies that the woman had committed a sin, but Jesus knows that the ones who brought the woman did not have forgiveness in their minds. They likely skipped the first two steps Jesus said should be followed when dealing with sin. Since it was more than one person who presented this woman to Jesus it is likely that rather than the one person who witnessed the sin didn't go to the woman in private to restore her, but instead called some of their friends to tell them what had taken place. We find this still true today, that we prefer to talk to others how we have been sinned against and hope to have their support rather than doing what Jesus encourages us to do to restore this relationship. These extra witnesses were not taken along because the woman had not failed to listen as described in the first step, but they all went along further to see if Jesus was going to follow what punishment was prescribed by the law.

As you heard a couple weeks ago, Jesus had given his disciples the keys to the kingdom of heaven and now he was teaching them how to use them. One key that was given to them was for forgiving sin (this is the loosing key) and the other key to let the sin remain (this key is the binding key). It always is the goal to use the loosing key so that sin can be forgiven. There are times when this is very difficult for us to do and next week, we will hear the second most cleverly orchestrated example of forgiveness in scripture and it did not happen right away. But when it took place, the rejoicing was so great and deep it caused both parties to embrace each other, and they wept together.

The first step that Jesus describes in forgiveness is to go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. We later learn in this gospel reading that this is not exactly the case. One of the other verses in this scripture that is so often misused is that whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among

them. We usually use this verse when there is a small group gathering for a bible study and we say that even though there is a small group, Jesus is with us. Or I have also heard it used to say that you can meet wherever and however you want and call it church. But Jesus adds that the gathering must be in his name. But when Jesus said these words, he was talking about his presence amid conflict between Christians. Jesus said, when you go to confront someone who has sinned against you, you will not be going alone. Jesus will be there as you unlock the forgiveness that was once bound by sin.

I am thankful that I have heard many stories of families that have used Matthew 18 and it has done just what Jesus promised it would do. There are families who have chosen not to carry broken relationships to their graves. The 18th chapter of Matthew also appears in the 15th chapter of our church constitutions. Our constitutions also encourage the church to use Matthew 18 as a means for reconciliation and repentance. Once again, Matthew 18 was never intended to be used as a hammer to deliver the blow of the law, but it to be used as a means leading to forgiveness and rejoicing.

Jesus also tells us what to do when there seems to be no admission of guilt and therefore no forgiveness delivered. Jesus tells us that when the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. How do you hear these words? Does this mean that since there was a refusal to listen, you now have permission to shake the dust from your shoes and move on? Or does this mean that you and I are to consider those who have sinned against us and failed to acknowledge and guilt in the same way Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors? Jesus did not avoid Gentiles and tax collectors. Jesus ate with them and made them his followers. These three steps toward reconciliation do not let us off the hook when we complete the third step. Like Jesus, we are to continue to seek reconciliation so that we can have a reason for rejoicing.

Renee Napier knows the freedom and the joy of using the key to forgive sin. She felt the full weight of the law on May 11th, 2002, when Eric Smallridge killed her 20-year-old daughter Meagan and her friend Lisa while he was driving drunk. Eric also felt the weight of the law and was sentenced to 22 years in prison and experienced all the evil that happens while living there. Renee began her journey of reconciliation by first grieving the loss of her daughter. Her grief, however, never ended and only grew as time went on. She did not wait until Eric was out of prison to find out if he was remorseful for the sin that he had committed. Instead, she followed Matthew 18. She was reminded that it was the one who had sinned against that reached out. Renee met Eric in prison, and it was evident to Renee that Jesus also was present as she forgave Eric for what might be considered for some to be an unforgivable sin. Not only has Renee spoken to 100's of thousands of people since that day on the sinful effects of drunk driving, but Renee and Eric are speaking together at events while Eric is shackled with ankle chains and who claims his identity in the prison is P22679, but because of the power of forgiveness, his identity in the kingdom of heaven is a forgiven child of God. What was forgiven on earth has also been forgiven in heaven. We get to hear a reminder of this powerful example of forgiveness whenever we hear Matthew West sing his song simply entitled, "Forgiveness" based on this true event.

Sometimes I find myself wanting to think that I am among the 99 sheep who have not strayed away from Jesus. But when I am honest with myself, I am the one who has gone astray. I am the one who has failed to forgive others, but thanks be to God, Jesus has hunted me down. He has considered me to be a Gentile and a tax collector and gives me the same undeserved forgiveness that Renee gave to Eric. Forgiveness, a reason for all of us to rejoice. Amen

Prior to disciplinary action, reconciliation and repentance will be attempted following Matthew 18:15-17.