

Year A Proper 23 Reconciliation is Not a Game of Three Strikes and You're Out Matt 18 v15-20

We are ministers of reconciliation. Paul is very passionate about this reality. We are one body for we all share the one bread. We are continuing the work of reconciling all creation – humanity included – continuing this task that Jesus began in his life and with his death. Being the imperfect creatures that we are, though, we have a really hard time doing this. Churches have a hard time keeping themselves together when controversial issues come up, let alone work at reconciling others and all creation surrounding us. We will – and we do – experience conflict in our lives and in our lives together as the Church and Matthew provides guidance from Jesus on how we are to handle conflict.

The words of Jesus that we hear today really need to be heard in terms of what Jesus says both before and after today's Gospel because, without the before and after, it sounds like Jesus is saying, "Three strikes and you're out" but that is not what is going on here at all.

Before today's words comes the story of the lost sheep. You have 100 sheep and 99 of those sheep are safely in their beds for the night. One is missing and you can't sleep for worry over this one sheep so you go out into the night, searching, until you find the little guy and, thrilled to pieces you bring him home rejoicing more over this one little sheep than over the 99 others who'd been safe all along. This is, of course, Jesus' way of saying that God worries over each person who has turned their back to God and God will rejoice each time one returns to Him.

Also, what we hear today is the tail end of some very important teaching on leadership in the Church. "First, would-be leaders in the community are to be as humble and teachable as children (Matthew 18:1-5). Next, Jesus' followers must

attend to matters of personal morality so that they don't become "stumbling blocks" in the paths of others (18:6-9). Third, faithful disciples cultivate care for one another (18:10-14) in the manner that Paul writes to the Romans. "Owe no one anything," he says, "except to love one another" (13:8a)" (Richard Ward, Working Preacher website).

After today's Gospel, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who has sinned against him. Peter asks if seven times would be enough and Jesus says "no – you must forgive 77 times." In other words, your forgiveness must be limitless.

So, before today's words we have God rejoicing over the sinner who has returned to God, teaching on being loving leaders, and after, we have Jesus saying our forgiveness must be limitless. It does not make sense for Jesus to say something completely different in between – "Give the sinner three chances and then he's out; you turn your back on him." What's really going on here?

Jesus is actually saying the same thing that he said in the before and after – he's telling us to go after the lost sheep and try to bring that lost sheep home – try it first by yourself in private, then with a couple of others, and then with the whole church. Matthew, using the words of Jesus, felt he needed to lay out this process for us for a couple of reasons.

Despite the fact that we, the church, are "one body for we all share in the one bread", people are people and, no matter how committed, painful breaks can occur in loving relationships. In contrast to the attitudes of the general population – the "forget about them; it's their loss; it's their problem" sort of thing – Jesus emphasizes that, when a relationship is broken, it is worth going back again and

again to work at healing it. It is worth making the flock whole again, bringing the wandering sheep back into the protection and care of the fold (see “Matthew” by Thomas G. Long, p.209-10). Salvation is wholeness. It means rescue, healing, and being made well, whole. So if we desire salvation, we must be aware that this means we desire wholeness – not just of ourselves but of all creation. Wholeness involves living as a reconciled community because the very fabric of God’s being is community – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God. Our one God of community desires the same for us: complete reconciliation of all creation in Christ. We cannot faithfully be the body of Christ if we are not continuously practicing reconciliation, the gathering work of Christ.

Most people do not like or want confrontation and, left to our own devices, will often avoid talking directly to someone who has hurt us, done us wrong, or made us angry. We frequently, instead, will take our hurt or anger away with us to deal with it on our own or maybe talk it through with a friend, or in prayer with God.

Talking about a person more than you talk to a person is never particularly helpful. The person doing the wrong will keep on doing it; the person feeling hurt or angry may have a hard time getting past those feelings, and the people they share their hurt with may feel angry on their behalf – sides are taken, rifts are created. Jesus advises us to avoid all of this negative fallout by first speaking one-on-one with the person who has sinned against us. If that doesn’t work, we go back again with a couple other people...to try to get the person who has turned away from God because of sin, to turn back again – to bring the lost sheep home.

There are many different things that can cause hurt and anger and division in a church – personality clashes, power struggles, differences of opinion...Every

congregation will need to be deliberate in learning to deal with disagreements in an atmosphere of mutual respect – accepting that there will be differences in people and differences of opinion while still loving them. That is exactly what Jesus was getting at when he said the next step was to involve the whole church and, if the sinner did not turn back to God, you were to treat them as a Gentile or tax collector – in other words, as an idol worshipper or a traitor.

Treat them as a Gentile or tax collector. This is highly misunderstood. Jesus is not saying “Three strikes and they’re out”. He is not telling us to give up. He is not advising us turn our backs and ignore those horrible sinners. We know how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. He loved them; he ate meals with them, he healed them, he welcomed them into his community of followers and gave them a sense of belonging when others shunned them. We are to love the person who has not yet turned back to God and we are to love the person who doesn’t agree with us. We keep loving – knowing that our love can change things because this love comes from the Holy Spirit. We love and we wait for their return, waiting to welcome.

Here we come to an amazingly powerful part of Jesus’ words today – that what we do when we gather together in Jesus’ name actually matters to God in Heaven. What we prohibit on earth will be prohibited in Heaven. What we allow on earth will be allowed in Heaven. That means that when we get together, in an atmosphere of love and respect, and decide how and if to apply God’s laws in specific situations, God will go along with that. This is the second time in Matthew’s Gospel that we hear these words: What we prohibit on earth will be prohibited in Heaven. What we allow on earth will be allowed in Heaven. We hear them first when Jesus tells us we are holders of the keys to the kingdom of

heaven. Why are these words so important that Jesus speaks them twice? Remember that heaven is God's kingdom – God's kingdom in all its glorious perfection. But God also rules the earth. This is God's kingdom as well and, each week, we pray together for the fulfillment of God's purpose: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. We prohibit on earth – God's kingdom – what God would prohibit. We allow on earth – God's kingdom – what God would allow because in doing so, we are co-workers of reconciliation, striving with God toward the fulfillment of God's purpose, hastening the day when God's kingdom and God's will attain the completeness on earth as they now have in heaven.

It is crucial to note that we are prohibiting and allowing according to God's ways and God's ways are ways of love. One priest, now a bishop, from a church in downtown Toronto, told a story that is a good example of this. His church's custom is to put the bread and wine at the back of the church then bring it to the altar with the offering. One Sunday morning, a homeless man walked in, took the wine and walked out. Now this man could have been charged with a few different things – stealing among them – but the people of the church did not apply God's law – they allowed the breaking of the law "thou shall not steal". They let the man go and they simply put out more wine. We know from the words of the Gospel today that God backed them up on that decision. And, in God's kingdom on earth as in heaven, there will be no need for stealing because all will share the abundant generosity of God – God's creation sustains all of us.

This Gospel reading just keeps getting better and better. Jesus says that when two of us agree on anything and ask, God will do it for us. And when two or three of us are gathered in his name, he will be here with us. What an amazingly wonderful feeling to know that the Spirit of God is here with us. We often use this

phrase to joke about small numbers of people gathering for a worship service. God will be with us regardless of how many people are here. But that is not the point of this phrase – where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. The point is that the people are gathered in a spirit of mutual respect and reconciliation. They are gathering to resolve differences according to God’s ways and Jesus will be among them to guide them. Likewise, when Jesus declares, “if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” we must remember the context. Jesus is explaining how to resolve conflict, how to achieve reconciliation. It does not mean that if Jennifer and I agree that we’re going to ask God to let us win the lottery so that we can build an animal shelter, that God will let us win the lottery to build an animal shelter.

Today’s Gospel tells us that we need to try and try again to bring back sinners to God and then, if our first couple of attempts don’t work, we are to continue loving them anyway; we gather in God’s name and we continue to love them; and when we gather we pray for them in love – and our prayers are powerful because we have Jesus here with us, working with us to achieve reconciliation. The love in our prayers that we have here comes from the Spirit and spreads to touch our families and to touch our friends, and to touch our community. We trust, and we know, that our love can and will make a difference because that love is the power of the Holy Spirit and we know that that power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.