

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. I was in seminary when our national church body, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was formed back in the mid to late eighties. As you may know, it was created out three predecessor Lutheran church bodies: the American Lutheran Church, or the ALC, which both Good Shepherd and St. Matthew's were a part of, the Lutheran Church in America, or the LCA, which Grace was part of, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, or AELC, the youngest and smallest of the three, and the one that my home congregation was part of. In spite of them all being Lutheran, there were significant organizational differences among these three predecessor church bodies that needed to be ironed out in the merger. I was in my mid-twenties at the time and admittedly pretty naïve in all sorts of ways, and my attitude to these differences was that we should just go ahead with the merger and then fight over the details as a family. Part of my naïveté came from my experience of family. I grew up in a functional, stable, and loving family. We fought, sure, and then we made up. I didn't know that all families aren't like that. I didn't know that some of the worst, most dysfunctional, and most destructive relationships are to be found precisely within families. So we did come together as the ELCA. We did become "one big family," so to speak. And sure enough those unresolved differences led to some congregations of the predecessor bodies not joining, and some more leaving only a few years in. I won't go into the details, because that's not my point.

But my point *is* that the church has, from the very beginning, thought of itself as a family, and also from the very beginning was having family fights and losing brothers and sisters left and right, as we remembered in last week's Manna and Mercy class. Today's Gospel reading was intended to deal with those inevitable fights. What to do when a brother or a sister in this family of the church sins against you. The passage begins, "*If* another member of the church sins against you," but it could just as correctly be translated, "*when* another member of the church, or another sister or brother, sins against you." What should you do then? Jesus has some ideas. But are Jesus' ideas what we think they are?

You may be surprised to learn that the constitution of our congregation has a chapter on disciplining members. It's not just our congregation. All congregations of the ELCA have this chapter. And the ruling model for disciplining a congregation member comes explicitly from the first three verses of this reading, verses 15-17. I'm sure there are very good practical and legal reasons for having a chapter on disciplining members in a congregational constitution. I would just prefer that we didn't link them to Matthew 18, at least not if we think that Jesus is telling us here the right way to get rid of people. Because that's not at all what is going on here.

I want to bring out three things in this text that point in a different direction, and then put this whole passage in its proper context in Matthew in order to help us see the radical nature of our calling as sisters and brothers in Christ. First is the fault. "If another member of the church sins against you," says Jesus, "go and point out the fault..." Point out the fault. The word fault isn't there at all in the Greek, but it's still an acceptable translation, and I want to play with English word fault because I think it opens up some interesting possibilities for us. Fault can mean a few things in English. It can mean something that someone has done wrong, it can mean the *blame* for something that has gone wrong, or in geology it can mean a crack or a fissure, a break in something. So pointing out the fault, in English, could mean simply identifying the problem between you and the other person, helping them see the fracture in your relationship, without necessarily assigning blame. Maybe it would work to go in with gun a blazing and blaming the

problem entirely on them. That *might* work. But maybe it would be more effective, more convincing, and more honest, to simply identify that there is problem between you.

Second, when you've done all that you can do, when you've pointed out the problem, when you have involved the whole church and still there is no healing of the fracture, no mending of the fault – when you have exhausted all your options, the last thing you do is treat that person you have a problem with like a Gentile and a tax collector. So, kick them out, right? But is that how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors? What about Zacchaeus? What about Matthew himself, the writer of this Gospel, who was a tax collector when Jesus called him? What about the Canaanite woman, or the two possessed men in the land of the Gadarenes? INSERT? In fact, Jesus gave special attention to both Gentiles and tax collectors, and at the very end of Matthew's Gospel Jesus will send his disciples out into the world to make more disciples of the Gentiles. So Jesus isn't making rules about kicking people out here. He's saying that the more they become estranged, the more they need to become the focus of your attention. It can't be an accident that these three verses, 15-17, come right after the parable of the lost sheep, in which the shepherd stops at nothing to rescue one lost sheep, defying all common sense by leaving the ninety nine.

Third, something needs to be said about the binding and the loosing. Jesus said exactly the same thing two chapters earlier in last week's Gospel reading, so I can't pass this over again without comment. "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." To "loose" here means to forgive sins. To "bind" means to *not* forgive. In last week's Gospel this appeared right after Jesus telling Peter that he would give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. And that is why confession and forgiveness is called the "office of the keys" and is seen as one of the most important roles of a pastor. Is this a special power given to pastors that leaves it up to us whether or not to forgive someone? That is how it has been treated. Don't forgive too easily. Make sure the one you're forgiving is truly repentant. But there's another way to hear this saying about binding and loosing that I think better fits the overall context of what Jesus is driving at. The church the Jesus founds on the rock of Peter's little faith has the deeply serious task of conveying God's forgiveness to God's people. Forgiveness is not a default state of existence. Think about your own closest relationships. When a fault appears, it needs to be attended to. You dare not presume a default state of forgiveness between you and your loved ones. That is a formula for disaster. Forgiveness happens only in the act of forgiving. If you don't do it, each time it's needed, it doesn't happen. That's what Jesus means here. Forgiveness, he is saying, is a gracious, deeply powerful, and necessary gift that God gives us to use. "Don't fail to use it," is what Jesus is saying. I know that this is *God's Work, Our Hands* Sunday when we focus on extending God's love to others in acts of service. It's a good slogan. I'm glad we have it. But it *first* has to be *God's Work, Our Mouths*, forgiving one another as God forgives us, *God's Peace, Our Eyes and Mouths and Hands* passing that peace to one another.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are hard. They are costly. And they are God's goal and mission in Jesus. Whenever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, there is bound to be a fault or two separating them. That's why we begin our services with confession and forgiveness. And right there in the midst of us and our faults stands Jesus himself, who has borne the cost of our faults on the cross, and who continues to stretch wide his arms to hold us together across all our faults. He is our unity, our hope, and our joy. May we trust this gospel promise. May it transform our lives and make us instruments of God's love and forgiveness in the world around us. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.