

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Today's Gospel reading from Matthew 18 goes to the heart of the Christian Faith – namely reconciliation. We get the word reconciliation from Latin (*reconciliare*). It literally means “to bring together again.” Reconciliation is the restoration of a broken relationship – the resolving of estrangement, conflict, or hostility between parties so that harmony or fellowship is renewed. Reconciliation is what God does with us human beings who are in captivity to sin, as we acknowledged once again in the Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness at the beginning of the service. Reconciliation is the whole point of God coming among us as one of us in Jesus Christ, the whole point of his teaching and healing ministry, and the whole point of his death and resurrection. Reconciliation is also what God means for us to do with one another. And the longer I live, and the longer I serve as a pastor, the more convinced I am that reconciliation is perhaps the most difficult thing we are ever faced with. And, in my experience, we are *terrible* at reconciliation, we human beings. And that is true even, and maybe especially, for us Christians. We are *terrible* at reconciliation, even though, in our tradition at least, we are rehearsing the language of reconciliation on a weekly basis: acknowledging our faults in the presence of God and one another, declaring our regret, asking for forgiveness, and then being forgiven in Jesus' name. Every week we go through that, and yet when it comes to our relationships with our fellow human beings: our fellow citizens, our neighbors and acquaintances, our colleagues and coworkers, and even our friends and families – siblings, spouses, children, parents – we find it extremely difficult to acknowledge our own faults and failures, and to forgive the faults and failures of others. We're so resistant, so seemingly allergic to forgiveness, that we have turned this section of Matthew 18, meant to be encouragement in being reconciled, into a manual for kicking people out of our churches. This is how you handle a difficult member, we think: three strikes and you're out. One on one, small group, the whole congregation, and then, the boot. In some contexts, Matthew 18 has been turned into a verb. When faced with a problematic church member, you “Matthew 18” them, subject them to this threefold process.

But is that really what is going on here? Did Jesus really mean to supply a paragraph for congregational constitutions when he spoke these words to his disciples, the Christian rule for getting rid of problem people? Two clues that he didn't are that this passage follows immediately after Jesus warning about causing others to sin, and then his teaching about the lost sheep. If a shepherd with a hundred sheep loses one of them, he leaves the ninety-nine and goes searching for it until he finds it. I don't know if that's what shepherds would really do, because it seems risky to leave the ninety-nine unguarded. But that's what Jesus says shepherds do, and he uses that behavior to make this point: “It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.” The moral of that story and everything before it in Matthew 18 is that God does not want *anyone* to be lost, even those you would consider “the least” among you.

I want to bring out three things in this text that help us to see what Jesus really intends for 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...” The word fault isn't there at all in the Greek, but it's still an acceptable translation, and I want to play with the 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. In English, pointing out the fault could mean simply identifying the problem between you and the other person, helping them see the fracture in your relationship, without necessarily assigning blame. And that is really the sense of the

Greek, without the play on words. So, in light of the earlier part of this chapter, identifying the problem would mean pointing out not just the sin of the brother or sister, but acknowledging that you might have played a part in causing the sin in the first place, that there is sin on both sides of the fault.

Second, the goal is to be listened to, to be heard, to have the problem acknowledged. “If you are listened to,” says Jesus, “you have regained that one,” that brother or sister. Because that’s the goal, right? We’re going after a lost sheep here, aren’t we? Or maybe both of us are lost sheep who need to be found? If the goal is reconciliation, how do you make yourself heard? Do you shout? Do you jump up and down, pointing your finger? Do you issue ultimatums? Those behaviors might get someone’s attention. They might even break through to a stubborn person, helping them to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. But do they win them back? Jesus suggests calling in reinforcements. But I don’t think that is about ganging up on them. Again, it’s about getting them to listen, to recognize what has happened, so that the fault, the fracture in the relationship, can be repaired.

Third, 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 listening and no healing of the fracture – 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, *now* we can 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? 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 Gentiles. So, Jesus isn’t making rules about kicking people out here. He’s saying that the more they become estranged from you, the more they need to become the focus of your attention. They become your mission in God’s larger mission of reconciliation.

One more thing, something that after decades of studying and preaching on this text, has occurred to me only this time around. I think this three-step approach to reconciliation laid out here in Matthew 18 can be used to describe how God in the bigger picture deals with us in Jesus. That there is a problem between us there is no doubt. We have sinned against God and our neighbor in thought and word and deed, by what we have done, and what we have left undone. So, God comes to us in Jesus – God with us, Matthew emphasizes – to call us to repentance, a change of heart and attitude. Step one. Then, in the chapter before this one, chapter 17, comes the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah up on the mountain top with Jesus, and the voice of God from the cloud saying, “this is my son... Listen to him!” Step two. Then Jesus goes to Jerusalem. He brings his appeal before the whole church, as it were, the seat of the religious establishment. He is put on trial. His case heard, you might say, but he is not listened to. Step three. The process has failed, there is no reconciliation, and now it is Jesus who is dealt with as a sinner and put to death for his supposed offenses. But that is not the end of the story. Through his death and resurrection the powers of sin, death, and evil are undone, and now the fourth step begins. Matthew’s Gospel ends with Jesus sending his disciples to the Gentiles to baptize and make disciples, going with the promise that he is with them always.

The goal has been reconciliation all along, and God just will not give up on that goal. We’ve got three strikes against us and yet, by the grace of God, we are still at bat, invited to live in and by God’s reconciling word, and to carry that life-changing, life-restoring word of love and forgiveness to other sinners near and far. May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.