

“MATTHEW 18!”

A Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 10, 2017

Text: Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus told his followers many times that, if we follow him, we will suffer. He never promised us a rose garden.

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age-- houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions-- and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30)

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. (Matthew 5:11)

Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10:38)

Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. (Matthew 5:39)

There are many more passages like that. And stories about the early disciples show that this was indeed the case. Following Jesus is more likely to make your life difficult and lead to hardship, than the opposite. But never mind, Jesus says, it will work out. Take no thought for vengeance. Just love and serve away.

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. (2 Corinthians 4:16)

The focus of a Christian is not to be on how things are working out for him or her, but on how things are working out for God and the neighbors. Is the way I live contributing to the coming of the kingdom? Are my neighbor's needs being met? Is the

peace of God getting out? Is God's will being done? Is the Father's name being hallowed?

Today's Gospel reading illustrates what it could mean for us, as Christians, to live for God and the neighbor even when we get hurt by someone.

It starts out with a hypothetical: "If another member of the church sins against you . . ." (Literally, "If your brother sins against you." We could also say "If your brother or sister sins against you." Early Christians took it very seriously that we were each other's siblings. That's why I start my email every week "Sisters and brothers." It's a fact. Then, we hear a process for such situations.

1. Notice, first off, we are already restricted in our concern to what that person has done to us. This is not a process for telling on people.
2. Secondly, we are specifically instructed not to tell anyone else. Only the person who has "sinned" against us. (If only Christians would take this literally, how much trouble could be avoided!) And, to make sure we don't try to cheat, it says "when the two of you are alone."
3. Now we learn that the aim of this process is to restore the relationship. How much more trouble would be avoided between people, if from the beginning of the process the plaintiff's purpose was not for him or her to "be made whole," but for the relationship to be made new.
4. Then, we are told to be patient. Try again. Before telling on the person or taking them to court or shaming them, bring a couple friends to try again, with the same end in view.

5. If you still have not succeeded in your aim of regaining the brother or sister, if you are still at odds with one another, then go—not to the authorities, but to the community of people who share your faith in Christ and your desire for the unity of all, and ask them all to help this person to be restored to a relationship of mutual love.

6. Most interesting at the end, is this. If you can't get the person to be your friend after all of that, well, it's time to quit. Let it go. He doesn't say, "Now you are free to get your revenge. Now you can sue. Now there are no holds barred." That is what Jesus does not say. He says, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

What does that mean?

In common use for centuries, that has been taken to mean that the offender should be excluded from the community. I don't think so.

"Let that person be like a Gentile to you"? I take that to mean this: From that point on, simply assume that the relationship between the two of you will be lopsided: you, for your part, acting with love; but not expecting that person to act towards you with love. You should instead expect that person to act the way "the world" always acts: selfish, seeking its own, pushing and shoving, trying to gain an advantage, and so on. That's all. Jesus does not authorize any sort of measures against that person, such as kicking them out of the congregation. After all, congregations included "literal" Gentiles and tax collectors.

But Jesus is not telling us to treat unrepentant offenders like strangers. He doesn't want us to lump them with others we are suspicious of and refuse to commune with. Jesus also does not want us to try to clobber them with Jesus talk and force them to see things in a Christian light.

This is not so different from Jesus telling his disciples that, when someone was not willing to listen to their message, they should shake the dust from their

sandals (that's absolutely all!!) and go somewhere else. In the same way here, what Jesus is forbidding us to do in his name matters more than what he is telling us to do.

When I was in seminary, "Matthew 18" was code language in my denomination. It was a snappy way of referring to a process which one was obliged to follow before getting rid of someone you didn't want in your church.

I have even used it that way myself.

Once, when I was on my internship, at a meeting of the congregation, a woman stood up and began accusing me of telling the confirmation class some things I had never said. They were rather provocative opinions that had to do with church politics, let's put it like that. If they were true, I would have certainly been in the hot seat.

Anyway, she had the microphone in the front of the assembly and was going on and on, accusing me of distorting the truth and using confirmation class to advance my "heretical" views during a time of conflict.

I flew off the handle, got up from my seat, walked up to the front, took the microphone from her hand while she was still talking, and said, "You have not followed Matthew 18." Something like that.

In other words, I clubbed her with Matthew 18. While at the same time breaking it myself! I was not going to her privately and telling her she had hurt me, sinned against me. I was telling the whole congregation! I had, to use our language of the day, "skipped steps." A big no-no. If you want to get rid of people, you have to abide by the protocol.

That is not what Jesus meant by the instructions he gives us in Matthew 18. These are in fact profound words which sketch how it could work, if people would just actually live to love one another even when someone hurts you.

You will be hurt by others. Even by Christians. And yet, your injury and the restoration of you are not what it is all about. Even in that extreme situation, it is all about the righteousness and peace which come through the forgiveness of our sins, and our forgiving one another from our hearts.

That is what we pray for all the time in the Lord's Prayer, and if we let our lives be governed by that prayer nothing will ever seem more important to us than regaining our brothers and sisters. All of them. Everywhere.

Amen.

