

Tending to Community

I. Introduction

- This is potentially a game-changing moment for every one of you.
- Today, in the hearing of this reading from Matthew, the curtain has been pulled back
 - and we catch a glimpse of the heart of God:
 - Jesus is here/in the room!
- “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,”
 - which of course echoes the last words of Matthew in which Jesus says,
 - “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
- Jesus is here/in the room, here among us,
 - and not just in church but everywhere we go!
- And this nugget of scripture gold may just alter the rest of your life.
 - Are you ready for that?

II. Context

- Now it's true that Matthew 18:15-20 sounds like a cut-and-dried formula for us church people to follow when conflict arises.
 - It's even found its way into our congregation's constitution – Article 15, to be exact.
- But if we read the rest of the chapter, it becomes pretty clear pretty quickly
 - that Jesus isn't really that interested in setting boundaries
 - that help us figure out who's in and who's out when things between us go south.
- Instead, the Jesus of Matthew 18 is concerned about “the least” among us, the vulnerable, the ones at the bottom of the power pyramid. (Listen!)
 - In verse six, Jesus says that it's better to tie a millstone around your neck and jump into the ocean
 - than to cause a little one to stumble in the faith.
 - In verse twelve, Jesus says that it's better to leave ninety-nine sheep in the mountains
 - than to lose a little one that has gone astray.

- And then the verses that immediately follow today's reading make it even more emphatic:
 - Jesus commands that we are to forgive someone not just seven times – which seems like a lot – but seventy-seven times!
- In other words, Matthew 18 is not about power and the exercise of authority over others; it's about community. (*repeat*)
 - It's about valuing so highly everything that binds us together
 - that our aim in life becomes doing all we can to regain a brother/sister
 - rather than separating ourselves from those who offend us.
- So with that as our lens, let's take a closer look at verses 15-20.

III. The Text

- It is clear that Jesus assumes that there will be times of conflict among us.
 - He understands that sin is at play in this world,
 - and because of that, there will be times when we will not be at our best:
 - we will make poor decisions;
 - we will harm our neighbor;
 - we will even act badly when we're at church.
- So when that happens, here's what Jesus says to do:
 - First, speak to each other face-to-face;
 - don't send a text, or tweet the other's misdeeds on Twitter or Facebook.
 - If talking with each other doesn't solve the issue, try an intervention –
 - get a couple more people involved to arbitrate the situation,
 - or even the whole community if the offender isn't seeing the error of their ways.
 - If none of that works, Jesus says cut them off and kick 'em out, right?
 - I know that's not the exact wording; technically Jesus says, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector,"
 - which is pretty much the same thing, right?
 - Well...actually... No, it isn't.
- Remember the lens we're looking through as we read these verses?
 - Matthew 18 is all about community, about regaining those who are lost.
- So before we rush to validate our human need to cast judgment on wrongdoers
 - and hand down verdicts that give them what we think they've got coming,
- let's remember Jesus is *in the room* – where two or three are gathered, right? –

- and then, let's remember how Jesus treated Gentiles, sinners, and tax collectors –
 - he ate with them,
 - he visited them in their homes,
 - he loved them into the kingdom even while he was dying on the cross.
- All of this is about community and restoring those who have lost their way back into the fold.
 - It's not to say that we don't hold people responsible for their sinful actions.
 - Healthy communities depend on order and personal accountability;
 - trust and honesty provide the bedrock on which strong, loving relationships are built.
 - But it is to say that, for those of us who follow Jesus,
 - our primary aim cannot be vengeance or retribution or even protecting our self-interests.
 - Instead, with Jesus as our guide, we remember that the one who has wronged us
 - is, in fact, one of God's children too, whom God loves just as much as God loves us –
 - we who are sinners just as much as the next person,
 - we who have been forgiven, again, as recently as today even though we don't deserve it.
 - So, as followers of Jesus, we strive for humility instead of arrogance.
 - We strive for mercy rather than revenge.
 - We strive for forgiveness rather than condemnation.
 - Because when we do, we open the door for God's grace to restore what has been broken.

IV. Connecting Faith to Everyday Life

- So think with me about what that means for daily life:
 - When hurricanes and pandemics ravage the land and people's livelihoods,
 - with Jesus in the mix, we choose to respond to human suffering and loss with compassion and generosity.
 - When hatred fuels violence and supremacists attack the dignity of fellow human beings,
 - with Jesus as our guide, we choose to cry out and agitate and advocate on behalf of those being treated unfairly

- while stopping short of demeaning and demonizing those with whom we disagree.
- When families become separated and grudges are held and it feels like betrayal has won the day,
 - with Jesus in the room promising to forgive us again and again,
 - we choose to have the hard conversations, we own up to our mistakes,
 - and we love each other back across the divide that separates us.
- This is as true at home as it is at work and at school, on the playground and in the public square, and even here at church.
 - With Jesus always with us, the conversations we have, the decisions we make, and the lifestyles we lead – in public and in private –
 - are guided not by what we want to happen
 - but rather by God’s vision for us and for all,
 - to live side by side in true community
 - where everyone experiences the love and grace of a God
 - who is with us, even to the end of the age.

V. Conclusion

- You know, don’t you, that you won’t always get it right.
 - I know I won’t always get it right.
- But here’s the game-changer: Jesus is here/in the room,
 - by our side, always with us to very end,
 - teaching us the way of love,
 - urging us on in the way that leads to abundant life,
 - forgiving us even when we don’t deserve it,
 - and sending us out to be agents of reconciliation and peace.
- Because in the end, you see, it’s not about who’s in and who’s out;
 - it’s about making sure the little ones are cared for
 - and the lost sheep are brought back into the fold;
 - it’s about becoming the community of love God wants us to be.
- Thanks be to God. Amen.