

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 10, 2023
 “No Limits Here” (Matthew 18:15-20)

Susan and I feel truly blessed that God has given us seven beautiful grandchildren to share our lives. It has been such a joy watching them grow – as it was with our own three – each developing his or her own personality. It has also been interesting to observe the dynamics of the relationships they’ve built with one another – with their siblings and with their cousins – and how they respond to different situations within those relationships.

Those of you who are parents or grandparents know that one situation that comes up time and time again is handling conflict – how they respond when they feel they’ve been wronged in some way. Most kids – our grandchildren included – get their noses bent out of shape for a little while, but, in general, they are quick to forgive, forget, and mend that broken relationship. However, in the adult world, where wrongs against us are more serious than having someone mess in our room, break our favorite toy, use our toothbrush, or eat our candy, you and I are not as quick to offer a word of forgiveness.

Think for a moment, if you will, of the worst thing someone has done to you. Think of a situation in which you were wronged. Perhaps it was someone’s deceitfulness in manipulating for him/herself a promotion, bonus, or reward that should have been yours. Maybe it was an underhanded business deal or a purchase you made in which you feel you were cheated. Maybe it was the way someone lied to you or betrayed you or hurt you in a way that was very painful. Do you remember? Most of us probably do because it is extremely difficult for us to forget such injustices. Some of us may still be harboring anger or resentment or seeking ways to avenge the wrong long after the perceived injustice took place – perhaps even years. We can picture such a time, can’t we?

Now picture yourself extending a forgiving hand to that individual who wronged you. It’s not such an easy thing to envision, is it? It’s not always easy for kids either. We sometimes force them to say *I’m sorry*, but the look on their faces tell us they’d rather be burned at the stake or tarred and feathered. What about you? Is it torture for you to forgive, to reconcile a relationship when you’ve been wronged?

Jesus has established his church on earth, a community of believers of which you and I are a part. And the church is a gift to us from God, a place where we can be nurtured and strengthened in our faith. However, knowing that the church exists in the midst of sin and brokenness, and that there will no doubt be conflict among its members, Jesus wants us to be prepared to deal with it effectively.

In today’s text, Jesus teaches us how to deal with a believer who sins against us. *If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens, you have gained that one.* Great words of Jesus, aren’t they? Go and point out the fault! Boy, my grandkids will be glad to learn that Jesus is giving them permission to do something they already do so well. What about you and me? This is probably the one command of Jesus it wouldn’t take us long to fulfill. Most of us would jump at the chance to go fault-finding, to go through someone else’s dirty laundry! We’re very good at finding fault with

others, being very adept at pointing out failures and shortcomings, while, at the same time, being blind to our own. And now Jesus gives us permission to do this? In fact, it sounds as though it is our obligation to point out another's fault for all to see.

But...that doesn't exactly sound like Jesus. Is there something we've overlooked? Jesus said, *If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault **when the two of you are alone***. There it is! Did you catch what we missed? We are to point out the fault when we are *alone*. And just when we thought we could publicly humiliate and dishonor that person and get the revenge we so desire. Isn't it sad that when we are wronged or hurt, the thing we want to do is build up ourselves by discrediting (or tearing down) the other person when what we *should* do when we go to them is to see them as God sees them – as one of God's children, as one for whom Christ died?

And going to them is the best thing we can do for ourselves. Putting the complaint into words is much better than brooding about it, for brooding poisons our minds and lives to the point that revenge is all we think about. And when one within the community of believers is poisoned, there is the danger of that creeping into the church. It's sort of like the bad apple that spoils the whole barrel. So, go to the person first, says Jesus.

But if you are not listened to, take two or three others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. In other words, if our first approach does not work, we are to make a second attempt at reconciliation by taking along some witnesses. That's a pretty good idea, right? It might serve us even better if, before we go, we warm them up to our point of view, telling them how things really are. Children are pretty good at this one too. They hurry to get to us before their sibling. With long faces, they tell some of the most pitiful accounts of the conflict at hand in an attempt to sway us to their side.

You and I probably do this quite a bit ourselves. We're always ready to tell our side of the story and emphasize how we were so tragically wronged. But Jesus reminds us that this third party is not to be used to render judgment. but to aid in the process of reconciliation by hearing the evidence objectively and seeing the situation through different eyes. They are there to mediate and make sure that Christian mercy and justice prevail over pride and judgment.

And if that still doesn't work? *Take it to the church*, Jesus says. For it is within the community of faith where broken relationships are made right. They are made right as a result of Christian love, Christian prayer, and Christian fellowship. Therefore, we should take it to the community of believers where mercy and justice abounds.

But if all this fails, what then? Jesus says, *Let such a one be to you as a Gentile or tax collector*. Now, that's a relief, isn't it? Finally, we're off the hook; for Jesus is telling us that there are limits to how much forgiveness we should offer. He is telling us that we only have to go so far in our attempts at reconciliation, and then we can wash our hands of the sinner and throw him out on his ear. We can treat him like a Gentile or tax collector, both of which are enemies to the truth of the gospel.

But again, is this really what Jesus means? Is this how he would respond? Understanding Jesus sometimes requires interpreting what he *does* rather than what he *says*. Throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus is seen in the presence of Gentiles and tax collectors. According to Matthew, Gentile magi followed the star to the baby Jesus. One of Jesus' first healings was a Gentile army officer's servant. He ate among sinners and tax collectors at the home of Zacchaeus. And what was Matthew doing when Jesus called him to be one of his disciples? He was collecting taxes.

Having spent so much time in the presence of these people, Jesus ought to know how to deal with them and how to treat them. Therefore, when Jesus says so treat the offender as a Gentile of tax collector, he is speaking from his own experience and how he would treat them. And the way Jesus treated them was with care, concern and compassion. So how can you and I do anything other than follow his example?

And, you know, Jesus still continues to be present among Gentiles and tax collectors, and he continues to show them care, compassion and concern. Who are these Gentiles and tax collectors, you might ask. Just look around, for we are all Gentiles and tax collectors in God's eyes, for all of us have been recipients of God's forgiveness and God's grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, if we think about it, Jesus is not asking us to do for someone else what God has not already done for us. There is no sin we forgive in others that Jesus has not first forgiven in us.

Surprise! There are no limits here. This text first appears to be about rendering tough judgment, but, in reality, it is about offering grace in the name of Jesus. We find that Jesus has set NO limits whatsoever as to how far we should go in extending forgiveness to a fellow believer.

And as we go about our daily living within the community of faith, Jesus gives us the promise that he is always with us: *Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*. That is the good news for today: that Jesus is always with us – with you, the Gentile he just loves to save, with you, the tax collector he loves to forgive. So, living in the light of this promise, we should be willing to follow Jesus' example in dealing with our own transgressors.

If we think about it, the ideal of Christian living is displayed in our children. What a surprise! We, who are older and wiser; we, who are to be their teachers, are actually being taught by them. For in the innocence of their youth, they are able to quickly lay aside judgment, prejudice, hatred, and resentment, and love others just for who they are. Shouldn't we all aspire to show the same level of love and forgiveness? Our children certainly have a lesson to teach us all! Amen.