

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 20, 2020
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Matthew 18:15-20 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. **16** But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. **17** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. **18** Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. **19** Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. **20** For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (ESV)

“Jesus Powers His People”

When you flip the switch, will the lights come on? Sounds like a silly question. But it’s a legitimate concern. Five years. Ten Years. 20 years from where will our community be getting its power from? I know our city leaders are pushing for an improved power plant that will make it viable and productive for many years to come. Other authorities in our state are pushing for power to come from cleaner, renewable sources. And there are issues facing real people on all sides. Issues like reducing the rates of asthma and other breathing issues that are impacted by air pollution. Issues like jobs and taxes that support our local economy. But my guess is that most people are just concerned about being able to push the button on their remote control and know that the TV screen will light up. That when they plug in their cell phone overnight, it will have been charged enough to get through the day.

When we take to heart Jesus’s words from Matthew 18, we can easily get bogged down in so many issues. We can turn them into a step-by-step policy on church discipline. We can look at it as an abstract theological issue. But the biggest takeaway Jesus wants for us is to see his power at work. Jesus gives his people gathered together in his name his power. He blesses us and powers our work together. And it’s all because Jesus’ promises go with us as Jesus powers his people.

God’s Solution is Better than our Culture’s

One thing we see when we dig into Jesus’ words in Matthew 18 is how refreshing this approach can be for conflicts between people. It’s very different from the way our culture has gotten used to handling disagreements and differences of opinion.

I don’t want to go on a tangent, so I’ll only give a brief overview of why we are in the situation we find ourselves in today. To oversimplify, it starts with a culture that says there is no such thing as objective truth. There is no one, absolute truth that applies to all of us. There is only power. And when there is a clash between my truth and your truth, we don’t exchange ideas or reason together. you merely have an identity showdown, in which the

more oppressed always wins, because that subverts the hierarchy.¹ We don't usually have the entire philosophy or worldview openly and clearly explained. We just see the results. If someone feels you are part of the group that is mistreating them, you lose the right to speak up, explain your views or even defend yourself. You don't have equal rights. Your opinions aren't equally valid as someone on the other side.

Now let's look at the instructions from Jesus. He sets it up this way: **"If your brother sins against you."** (Matthew 18:15) This isn't just an offense or an opinion you disagree with. This is something outside the bounds of God's will for his people that was done to you. But then Jesus tells us how to deal with that sin: **"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."** (Matthew 18:15) We can keep going with the steps from there. But first, there are some important points to take to heart. First, if you have been wronged by someone, you go to them personally, privately to address the sin. This is an important first step because they might not even realize what they have done or what it did to you. This gives them a chance to correct it before it get shared with anyone else. The second thing to note is that this is done with the goal of winning back the brother or sister who has sinned against you. This motivation is so important. Your goal is to free them from the shackles of sin and guilt. You want to help them escape from the dangers of being separated from God and the prolonged impact of that separation on their spiritual welfare.

God's People Personally Appreciate His Healing

Now, maybe you are thinking what I'm thinking. If Jesus makes it clear what to do when someone sins against you and makes it equally clear why we address the sin privately, why do we find it so hard to do what Jesus instructs us to do? At the risk of oversimplifying things again, the problem isn't just the sin in someone else. I have to come to grips with the sin in myself. Even if I am sinned against, my sinfulness so often prevents me from handling it the way Jesus describes.

Just ask yourself this question. How do people outside the church see the church? One of my favorite phrases about church goes like this: The church is a hospital for sinners not a museum for saints. It's the place where triage happens. It's where sin-sick people come for help and healing. But in reality, is that how most people see us? If not, why not?

Let's be honest. Even in the church, so often conflicts come up because of a misunderstanding of power. We don't have to look too far for explanations. We know ourselves. When someone sins against me, I don't usually immediately ask myself how I can help that person? I don't automatically think of what would be the most beneficial response for them. I feel wronged, attacked, treated unfairly. We can (rightly) criticize our culture that says we can silence those who disagree with us or take away their right to disagree. But when I look inside myself, I see default reactions so different than trying to be a hospital for sinners. I quickly criticize people questionable decisions even if they aren't sinful. I grow

¹ Sullivan, Andrew. "The Roots of Wokeness." Published 31 July 2020. Accessed at <https://andrewsullivan.substack.com/p/the-roots-of-wokeness>

impatient with people who do things different than the way I would do it. I get frustrated when their responses bring results different from what I want.

Here's a very simple explanation. Being judgmental so often comes from hearts that have a hard time handling guilt. Criticizing unfairly is so often a result of struggling with our own flaws and failures. No one knows my mistakes better than I do. No one knows all the disappointments I'm not proud of better than me. And one way to feel better about myself is just to tear someone else down. Point out their flaws. Show how far from perfect they are.

Let's take back the church from cultural captivity. Let's restore the church to its proper role instead of my personal priorities. Let's see more clearly the way Jesus designed his church to be. That means starting by dealing with your flaws and failures, your mistakes and inadequacies. There's a reason why Jesus gives such clear directions about sinful conflicts between Christians. It's not primarily an issue between two people. It's first about your relationship with God. And God doesn't respond to your sin by shaming or criticizing you. God doesn't answer your wrongs by cancelling or silencing you. God treats sin. Jesus brings healing.

God's People are Blessed by Our Community and Mutual Commitment

I'm going to make an observation about COVID. And I don't want to spark any debates about masks or government decisions or CDC guidelines. I've simply noticed that the people most cautious about COVID are the ones who have had close friends or family members who have suffered from the disease. Your personal susceptibility or connection to those susceptible makes you more empathetic.

Jesus came for sin-sick souls. Jesus came for people who know how dangerous sin is, because we have seen how it affects our own hearts. Jesus came to bring release from sin rather than pile up new requirements. Jesus came to give freedom not more guidelines to feed your sense of superiority. His perfect life means freedom from the pressure of comparing yourself to everyone else. His sacrifice on the cross was the painful way of dealing with all your flaws and mistakes that frees you from having to hide them or conceal them. His resurrection is the key to restoration with your God that frees you from lashing out at others because of your bitterness, anger or resentment. Because of Jesus' life you are released from guilt. Because Jesus finished his mission of rescue, heaven is open to you.

The greatness of Jesus comes to you in grace. Treatment for your wounds and healing for your disease. So instead of doing what comes naturally and instinctively when someone sins against us, Christians can respond with care, concern and compassion. The church is at its best when we respond with grace instead of greatness. Greatness focuses all on me. Grace sees needs and responds the same way Jesus responded to you.

I remember hearing a Christian college professor wishing church was more like Alcoholic Anonymous. This particular professor had struggled with mental health and substance abuse. I won't endorse everything about AA. But his point was that whenever you show up to an AA meeting, they just thank you for coming. No one asks where you've been or why you've been gone. They just know this is where you need to be. Or maybe we can think of

the church like an Emergency Room. Your history and the cause of your emergency are important. But not as important as figuring out how to help you and getting that help to you urgently. You could even think of the church as a homeless shelter. When someone first shows up, they might perform an intake. Are you in danger? Do you have any preexisting conditions that make you vulnerable? Once you have shelter, clothes and nourishment, then we can address the other issues. Sinners need help. Sinful people need the healing only Jesus can offer. All those at risk of spiritual exposure need the power and promises of Jesus. You can give it.

Correcting, rebuking, and forgiving are huge responsibilities. We recognize it takes work to fight against the natural instincts in our hearts and respond with God's healing when we've been sin. It requires effort to swim against the currents flowing out of control in our culture. Well, Jesus tells us we don't do it alone. True, we can work with two or three others to confront sin. Yes, we can enlist the support of the entire congregation. We have prayer. We work together. But today we are reminded of a power much greater than all of that. You have Jesus.

Jesus gives the church its mission and motivation. The he offers more than a manual for church discipline. And he's not giving saying agreement guarantees we will get whatever we want. God's people band together to reach out in love to the hurting and the straying. When you forgive sins from those who sorry over their wrongs, you are speaking peace from Jesus. When you withhold forgiveness from those who persist in error, you speak on the authority and from the heart of Jesus that aches over every sinner who goes astray. When you gather with two or three or forty, you gather in the name of Jesus. When you face messy or confusing or uncertain situations you seek God's will from his Word, you pray for the Lord's will to be done, and you know Jesus goes to work with you. Forgiven sinners do their work powered by the one who gave his life to forgive us.

You can think of the power of Jesus like a power plant. You might not always understand how it works. You might not realize how it gets to your power outlet. But it's there. And it works. Jesus works. Jesus works through his people sharing his word of rebuke and discipline, his word of forgiveness and comfort. Jesus works when his people band together to accomplish his mission. Jesus works when we make his will and his name our top priorities. His promises give you power. His promises have been reliable in the past. His promises will adapt for future generations. Jesus powers his people. Amen.

+ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. +