

Proper 18 Year A — Matthew 18:15-20

“If another member of the church sins against you,” Jesus says at the beginning of our lesson this morning, setting up this discussion of how we should respond to sin in community. This is not something we like to talk about, of course, because it seems too pointed, too harsh. In the church, we’ve lost any sense of how or why sin impacts us as a community.

You should know however that this gets even a bit harder. If you have a Study Bible and read those words, you’ll see a footnote marking. Down in the small print you’ll learn that some of the most ancient manuscripts don’t include the words “against you,” so instead it simply reads, “If a member of the church sins...” Those two words in English “against you” give us a bit of wiggle room, because it means that only if we are the ones wronged do we head down this pathway that Matthew sets up. But if we omit those two words, then there is a lot more responsibility placed on our shoulders, responsibility most of us would rather not take.

This focus Matthew has on the community is so completely foreign that we are shocked when he discusses how we are to respond to sin within that context. There are a couple of reasons for this, I believe. First, we have completely bought into the bedrock of our society’s worldview that our lives are our own and we can do what we please. Additionally, we’ve lost a sense of the seriousness of sin. Let’s explore both of these briefly.

I would contend that our rugged individualism has gotten us into a bit of a bind. We imagine that when we sin, it is merely an individual problem between ourselves and God, and, possibly, an offended party. In other words, it’s nobody else’s business. Or, to put it another way, we say, “Keep your nose out and leave me alone.” And most of us are eager to oblige these desires. For one reason, we don’t think it’s our place. For another, we don’t want to come off as judgmental or

vindictive or self-righteous. Of course, we certainly wouldn't want to invite this type of intrusion on our own lives, so all the better to leave well enough alone.

Jesus, however, doesn't buy these arguments. Being a Christian means at its core that we are in this together. Christianity isn't an individual endeavor; it isn't just about you and God. Rather, it is lived out only in community, and that is why we gather each week to worship together, and join one another at this table, to tangibly represent that this life is lived together. Recall the number of times Paul calls followers of Jesus the body of Christ in his epistles, and how we are all connected to one another.

So if a member of the community is sinning, there are ramifications far greater than we often imagine. Frederick Buechner describes sin in this way, "The power of sin is centrifugal. When at work in a human life, it tends to push everything out toward the periphery." He continues, "Other people and (if you happen to believe in him) God or (if you happen not to) the World, Society, Nature—whatever you call the greater whole of which you're part—sin is whatever you do, or fail to do, that pushes them away, that widens the gap between you and them and also the gaps within your self." In the pushing away, we become more and more isolated and disconnected from others, from God, and also from our selves.

So it does matter to others in our faith communities on how we live our lives. Especially in our interactions with one another, but also in how we conduct our private lives. And notice how Jesus tells us to respond. We are to go to that brother or sister in private and try to work it out. This is done in love, in respect, and with care. This isn't fodder for a conversation at coffee hour or for gossip. Jesus isn't talking about self-righteous vindictiveness, but, as one commentator put it, "a radical caring for ... the [one] straying and of grace and forgiveness beyond all imagining." And if this doesn't work, we get someone else to come with us and try again. To be clear, what we are hoping for is repentance and restoration. We are trying to bring that person back into community.

And the key to that is remorse and amendment of life. Which brings me to my second point, that we have lost a sense of the seriousness of sin. I think it's easier to focus on the restoration piece than on the regret piece. Many of us want to gloss over the hard part, the admitting that sin has in fact created gaps, and head right over to the grace part, the welcoming back into community part.

But that is not the way the Christian life works. There's a cost, and if we move directly to step two, we miss the point. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*, declares that such a misunderstanding of God's forgiveness should be called "cheap grace" and that this is not true and orthodox theology. He writes, "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." "Cheap grace is the grace we bestow upon ourselves."

In the movie "The Mission" there is a powerful scene where Rodrigo Mendoza—the character played by Robert DeNiro—is climbing alongside a waterfall with a huge pack of armor and weapons from his former life tied to him, weighing him down. He is doing a self-imposed penance for taking the life of his brother, and for the life he had lived capturing and trading enslaved people. He is traveling to the Roman Catholic mission at the top of the waterfall in Brazil, and along the way he slips in the mud and falls a number of times. At one point, one of the monks traveling with him gets frustrated with the slow pace and the obvious difficulty that Mendoza is experiencing, so he cuts him loose from the pack and pushes it into the water. Rodrigo says nothing, put walks back and reties the weight to himself.

When Rodrigo finally gets to the top, an indigenous man runs up to him with a knife since Rodrigo is recognized immediately as he used to come to this area to capture slaves. The man holds the knife to Rodrigo's throat, and shouts at him for

a number of moments, and it is clear Rodrigo knows his life is over. But in a moment of grace, the man moves his hand and instead cuts the rope attached to the load Rodrigo has been carrying and pushes it over the falls. Rodrigo experiences salvation for the first time in his life, is overcome with emotion and sobs uncontrollably.

What he experienced is costly grace, grace that comes only from Jesus Christ and requires us to live more deliberately in our desire to follow him. We have come, I think, to set the bar too low. Discipleship means more than showing up to church on Sunday. It means discipline in our lives, and in trying to reach the ideals given to us by Christ. And Paul lays them out for us in our reading this morning, that the law is summed up in loving God and loving our neighbor.

But—and here's the rub—we will fail. We will fall short. We are only human. Which brings us back to the beginning of our passage in Matthew. When we see someone else sinning—or when someone sees us doing so—then as a community, we need to reach out in love to bring that person back into the community. We need to approach that person the way we would want to be approached and express as clearly as we can how that person may be missing the mark in their walk with Christ, and invite them to repentance.

And we need to be open to that correction ourselves. This is not about judgment; it's about love and care. It's about compassion for one another. It's about living in community.

Some may say, nope, that's not for me. I don't want to be a part of that kind of church, or, I want to keep on living my life the way I have been, thank you very much. And after multiple attempts for reconciliation, there comes a point where that person might leave. This is so foreign to us because we want to be places of love and forgiveness and such an action seems harsh and vindictive. Yet, if we are to be a community of disciples, we must recognize the cost associated with that

life, and also recognize that unrepentant sin brings in divisiveness and destroys the community. We cannot offer cheap grace. We must declare that discipleship comes at a cost. “Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector,” Jesus says.

But even then hope is not lost. Because, of course, Gentiles and tax collectors were welcomed into the church with open arms when they sought forgiveness, when they recognized how their actions were harmful to themselves and to the community and to their relationship with God. The Good News of Jesus Christ rests on the foundation of repentance and forgiveness, and we are all of us recipients of that grace and love. And I believe that Gospel message has the power not only to change us, but our very world. May it be so. Amen.