

Matthew 18:15-20  
Romans 13:8-10

#### GATHERED IN CHRIST'S NAME

In February of 1977, I had been in my first pastorate eight months when the funeral director called and asked me to officiate at a memorial service. I agreed to help out but I didn't know what was in store for me. The woman, who had died, was the widow of a man, who had been quite wealthy. He had owned a large number of run-down houses that he rented to the mill workers; over time, his fortune had grown. The man and his wife had one son but, for reasons unknown to me, they did not want the boy; instead, his grandparents raised him. Over time, this couple became close to a nephew, who was more of a son to them than their own son whom they had disowned.

Since the father had died previously, and now the mother had died, what would happen to all of their money and those dilapidated houses that brought in a tidy sum each month? Both the son and the nephew (and their families!) were vying for the goods, and they didn't trust each other at all. In fact, they despised each other! When I met with them at the funeral home to plan the service, I had to meet with each family separately in different rooms for they refused to meet together. The day of the funeral, the two families sat on opposite sides of the chapel, divided by the middle aisle (and so much more). At the graveside and afterwards, they refused to speak to each other. I was glad when that ordeal was over. However, I was terribly saddened to think that, while the widow had been laid to rest, there was still a great deal of unrest and hatred between her survivors and inheritors – due to a lack of love and a big pile of money!

That experience came to mind as I reflected on the Gospel passage for today. Both Jesus and Matthew were concerned about conflict within the church family. What needed to happen if and when two members of the church were at odds because one had sinned against the other? What steps would lead to peace?

Before we consider Jesus' formula for dealing with conflict, it's important to note the context. On the front end is Jesus' parable of the lost sheep; Jesus told how the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in order to search for the one that is lost. And when found, the shepherd rejoices – why? – because “it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.” Then, following our text for today, Peter asked, “If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive, seven times?” And Jesus responded by saying, “No, seventy times seven,” which means over and over again. Both of these “before and after” stories emphasize relationship over being right, forgiveness instead of judgment, and reconciliation as opposed to retribution. Today's Gospel lesson stresses identical hopes.

Here's how we are to respond when another member of the church sins against us. First of all, we are told to go and meet with the other person; this advice is quite different from our own tendency to stew about the problem until it becomes even bigger. No, we are to seek the person out and discuss the problem, which has caused a rift in the fellowship. We are urged to speak the truth in love; be forthright and be sure to listen; don't be abrasive or accusatory. Seek not to humiliate the other but to heal the hurt and restore the relationship. If that doesn't work, take one or two others to meet with you and the other. They can offer another perspective or a different solution that may lead to reconciliation. If there is still a problem, the next step is to take the matter before the church. While this is not an easy step to take, the idea behind it is to get many others involved in trying to settle the dispute through communal love, prayer, and fellowship – as opposed to the legal system, which can only make matters worse!

The final step is this: “if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” At first reading, it sounds like Jesus is telling us to put an end to the whole mess and get rid of the offender; kick the trouble-maker out of the church. In fact, there are some scholars, who suggest that is precisely what Jesus is saying here; in other words, after you have done all you can, if the offender still refuses to budge, then you are justified in excommunicating him or her. However, it's important to remember Who is doing the talking – it is the very same Jesus, who associated and ate with tax collectors, and who showed compassion to the Gentiles. Jesus didn't wash his hands of these outcasts; no, he reached out to them in order to include them in his Father's kingdom. Thus, this fourth step must surely mean that we are to treat those who sin against us, not as enemies to be despised, but as brothers and sisters, whom we are called to make every effort to love even more, not less!

We are gathered into the church in Christ's name, and, when conflicts arise that threaten to split the church, we are called to go to work to exhaust every possible means to forgive each other and restore peace to the fellowship. And, it's precisely because we are “gathered in Christ's name” that we go to such extremes. After all, that's how Christ loves us and forgives us. Christ went from the glory of heaven to the top of a garbage heap outside of Jerusalem, to die on a cross in order to reconcile us to God, to each other, and even to our own best selves. If Christ Jesus did that much for everyone of us, surely we can make the effort to make amends and do everything possible to restore a brother or sister to the fellowship of the church.

The Apostle Paul, in today's epistle reading from Romans 13:8-10, reminds us that the hallmark of the church is our expression of love for one another; “for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law... love does no wrong to a neighbor.” We are commanded to love as we are loved and to forgive as we have been forgiven. The Lord has every right to give this command and make this demand upon us – why? – because this church is not ours but his; and Christ, the One who gathers us into his church, is more interested in restoring the peace and keeping the fellowship together than he is concerned about who's right and who's wrong. He wants the family back together.

Forgiveness is required for the health of the community. We are gathered together and, in Christ's name, we are called to be a redemptive fellowship that passes on the mercy we have received from the Lord to others, who are also in need of mercy. To “love your neighbor as yourself” is to be faithful to Jesus who reconciled us to God and who has entrusted to us the message and the

ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:16-21).

With that in mind, here's how forgiveness can work in real life. The story is told about a conversation that took place between President Abraham Lincoln and Thaddeus Stevens (no relation!), a bitter man from Massachusetts who served on Lincoln's Cabinet. Stevens shared the view, after the War Between the States had ended, that the South should be crushed. Lincoln advocated for binding up the nation's wounds, showing forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation. Thaddeus Stevens arose and shouted, "Mr. Lincoln, I think enemies ought to be destroyed!" President Lincoln quietly said, "Mr. Stevens, do not I destroy my enemy when I make him my friend?"

In that same spirit, led by the Holy Spirit and gathered in Christ's name, let us love one another even to the point of going out of our way to forgive and restore a sister or a brother to the family. Bound to Christ Jesus, we are bound to each other by his love. When we are gathered in Christ's name as a forgiven people, who also forgive, and especially this morning as we come to partake of the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we can experience anew that the Lord is ever faithful to his promises, for Christ is truly present among us at the table. In joy and in obedience, let us prepare ourselves to commune fully with the Lord and with each other – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens  
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA  
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