



## Scripture and Sermon

September 6, 2020

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### Matthew 18:15-20

**15** "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 to you, you have regained that one. **16** But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. **17** If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. **18** Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. **19** Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. **20** For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

### Sermon:

I am sure that all of you can think of some movie or tv show where if the two characters had just *talked about it*, things would have been resolved and they would have saved themselves a whole bunch of strife. I think almost every Hallmark romance movie includes this in the plot in some way. I also think of Disney and superhero movies that have villains who might not have been so villainous if they had gone to the person that wronged them and told them how they felt instead of letting it fester. One of those is Syndrome, the villain in Disney's movie, Incredibles, who felt stilted and belittled by Mr. Incredible when he was a child, but he never did anything with those feelings and so he grew up, letting them turn to spite. Or the Prince in Beauty and the Beast is turned into the beast because he wronged the enchantress and she decided to teach him a lesson through punishment instead of talking it out.

I am sure that you all can think of sometime in your own life where you bottled something up instead of talking it out with someone. Maybe you did end up talking to them about it. Perhaps you have also experienced being on the other side, the one who is told by someone else that you wronged them. Those situations are almost always uncomfortable, for both sides. Conflict and confrontation are things that most of us almost always like to avoid. Conflict Resolution and reconciliation are not easy things to engage in, especially as we are part of communities that have friend groups, cliques, and differing power dynamics, and to top it off there are different sides to the story. But,

if we take the easy route and avoid the conflict, it is rarely healthy for us. When we avoid addressing conflict, we can start to talk *about* one another instead of talking *with* one another. Jesus wants better for his church. We as the church community are called to treat each other well, and that means that we have to address when something goes wrong, so we can find reconciliation and learn how to do better.

Matthew 18:15-20 is a lesson about conflict resolution, but it is also a reminder that from the beginning, where two or more are gathered, there will be struggles to get along. People, from the beginning, have had social structures and hierarchies that make living in community complicated and prejudices and isms (racism, sexism, classism, etc) that cause harm between people. Jesus gives this lesson to the Christian Church Community on how they are to live together, particularly when there are those who are guilty of sinning against someone else and they remain unrepentant or disruptive to the congregational life. This is important to highlight. The template given by Jesus for conflict resolution is not meant to be universal. The passage begins with “If another member of the church sins against you...” It is meant for the Christian community, for within Church families, that are committed to living life together as Christ calls us and have the hoped end goal of reconciliation, and not division. It is important to remember that these instructions are specifically for the church community, as this template is not perfect for all conflicts between all people and does not guarantee good results if applied universally. It could actually cause more harm than good in some situations. Particularly because the first step asks the one who was harmed to confront the one who harmed them alone. For those whose conflict is something like domestic or sexual abuse or racial violence, confronting the harmer alone could lead to more harm, basically putting themselves in harm’s way. We know from the way that Jesus speaks about the vulnerable, that he does not want them to be put under further harm. So, it is important for us to know what kind of situations this conflict resolution is meant for or could work for.

To have a better idea of what kind of situations that Jesus had in mind, we can look at the other passages and teachings that are around this passage. First, this is not the only passage in Matthew about how to treat your sibling in Christ. The sermon on the Mount tells of a series of expectations for those being “trained for the kingdom of heaven” as it says in 13:52. 5:22 instructs, Being angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment. 5:29 instructs, If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. 5:39 instructs, Do not resist an evildoer. 5:44 instructs, Love your enemies. And 5:48 instructs, be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect. Jesus has been teaching about what it means to be a Christian community, a Christian family, since the beginning of his ministry. He sets the bar high, and here, as we know from last week’s passage, that he is starting to look ahead and know that his time on

earth is drawing near to the end. Now is the time to address the hard parts of being in community and remind them how he will continue to help them do that work.

Looking at chapter 18 in particular, we can know that this dialogue is part of a larger response to the “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” question that is posed to Jesus by the disciples in verse 1. Following it, before we get to our verses of today, there are some familiar teachings that are Jesus’s response. He first calls over a child and brings them among them and says that they must become like children to enter the kingdom, and that welcoming a child is like welcoming him. Then is the teaching to not be a stumbling block to children’s faith. Then it is The it is better to cut off your limb than to stumble in your faith. Then! We have the parable of the lost sheep, a teaching to not let the “little ones” go astray, but to care about the individuals that could be lost to the faith. All of that in just 14 verses, and the conversation continues with our passage for today. When we consider all of these passages together we can get a better idea for what Jesus is trying to say overall by putting them together. At the most basic, these passages all come together to be about what it means to be in Christian community. But a little deeper than that, all of them are about ways that things can go wrong in the community, and so are reminders against attitudes and practices that obstruct the flourishing of God’s children and how we must do better. We must be humble, we must not cause others to stumble in their faith, we must be willing to change to not stumble ourselves or cause others to stumble, we must value those that fall astray. And now, when you have caused hurt to another or been hurt by another, this is what you ought to do to be reconciled and remain a healthy community. Deeper still, Jesus frames these teachings by centering children, so we are meant to particularly consider these teachings for how we treat those who have the least power-- those who are the most vulnerable among us, those who face larger risks, who have the most to lose, and/or are in a dangerous situation.

The teaching that is our focus this morning is then about how to be in community together, particularly with those who are vulnerable, when there is conflict or harm being done. The model that Jesus proposes encourages honest dialogue, instead of silence, in the face of harmful behavior. The teaching starts by addressing the issue between the individuals, but as it concludes, we can recognize that this model is more about how we as a community deal with conflict, by walking alongside, and protecting, those who have been harmed, particularly if they are disempowered or made vulnerable, and by supporting the harmed person to speak up and stand up, as well as for the person or party who did the harm to hear them. Jesus is giving instruction to how the harmed, the harmer, and the community are to be a part of resolving conflict. I am going to spend a little time focusing on what Jesus’s lesson is teaching each group.

First, as Jesus invites with step one of the template, I will focus on what the person who was harmed is to do. Step one of Jesus’s conflict resolution plan is for the

person who was harmed to go to the person who harmed them and tell them what was hurtful. In the culture at the time Jesus taught this, this step was first as it would try to sort it out privately which would save both parties from embarrassment. Taking the care to not skip this step shows that even though the other harmed us, they have feelings that do not deserve to be hurt. This step begins one of the take aways from this template, which is an encouragement to have open communication with each other. When we do not, we are opening ourselves to the destructiveness of secrets, conversations behind other's back, and dishonesty. Those practices can lead to rifts in a community, triangulation, strengthen unhealthy cliques, and more hurt feelings all around. By being brave and opening communication, we are creating a healthier community for all. Though it can be so uncomfortable and tense, this first step tells us, that when we are the one who feels harmed, we cannot expect the other party to read our minds and know they need to apologize, it is our responsibility to face our hurt and the one who caused it head on. It is the responsibility of the one who was hurt, and the lesson is pointed to those who were harmed, because it is always easier for someone to identify they have been harmed than for someone to self-identify that they harmed someone else. This unfortunately means that the harmed have to bear the responsibility of confronting the harm and harmer and instigate the hope for resolution. This idea also acts as a reminder that we can all cause harm, both as part of systems and individually, without meaning to or realizing we did.

This leads us to what Jesus is saying to those who did the harming. The biggest message to those who do wrong is to listen. Listening is referred to four times within the first three verses of this passage, all in reference to the harmer. Verse 15 says, If the member listens to you..." Verse 16: "But if you are not listened to..." verse 17 has 2: "refuses to listen to them..." "refuses to listen even to the church..." This is the responsibility of those who did the harm. Their tough responsibility to take on in the name of resolution and reconciliation is being willing to listen and accept the truth of the person who came to them. Listening requires more than just sitting there, being present, or even allowing the other person to say their piece. The listening that Jesus is referring to, is a listening to absorb, listening to accept the word of the other as their truth, listening not to have a retort or defense, but to hear how you must repent. This is particularly important as we consider that this passage is particularly instructing the Christian community how to treat the vulnerable, those with the least power. A call to the one who did harm to listen to those who are the "least of these," is counter-cultural. Much of our society relies on those with the least power taking the hit so others can benefit. Jesus is teaching us here, that in Christian community, we are not to follow those cultural norms, but no matter who you are or who the other is, if they come to us with a complaint of a hurt being done, it is our job to listen, and Jesus hopes the response will be to repent.

Though Jesus knows that that first step won't always work perfectly. That one-on-one conversation may not lead to the one who did the harm listening and agreeing that there was wrong done that they need to repent for. And so, Jesus's second step to seeking conflict resolution is to bring one or two others to act as witnesses to the conversation. This step is reminiscent of a longtime Jewish tradition of conciliatory acts on behalf of the community. These witnesses come like mediators, both supporting the harmed party and encouraging their truth to be believed, *but* also guarding the harmer from arbitrariness or hasty action by the single individual that has felt hurt by them. This step helps bring others in to facilitate, but is another step to maintain it as private as possible, instead of a public drama. Jesus does not say who these one to two people we ask to join us in finding resolution should be. In the idea of trying to find resolution and not more complications, the people that are invited in, ought to be those who can balance supporting the harmed and being committed to their healing, and also giving fair treatment to the one who did the harm. Some live out this step by using community leaders as those witnesses. In today's church, perhaps it is a lay leader or the pastor who are practiced at being a mediator and can act as a bit more of a neutral party to the conflict.

Jesus's last step, is if the person who did harm has still not repented and been willing to be a part of resolution with a one-on-one conversation or with the mediators, is to take it to the whole community. This sounds dramatic, and perhaps would be in practice, but it is not such a crazy idea. Harm being done to one in our community should be an issue to all, and often has negative ripple effects through the whole community. So, it makes sense to let the whole community help in the resolution if it comes to it. This acts as the "buck-stops-here" step. If the harmer does not repent by now, when things were tried to be handled in private, it is now time to bring in the big guns, of making the transgression open to the whole community. This allows for the whole community to implore the harmer in a spirit of love and forgiveness to repent, and if not to take action for the one who was harmed in a way that is more than just talk or a slap on the wrist. In this case, it is to remove them from the community. The text says "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." That means someone outside the community, but also, from how we know Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors, does not mean to treat them badly or like they are dead to you. It means setting a boundary, that they are not allowed to treat someone in the community that way, and that the community will not allow them to continue like nothing happened. This still sounds harsh, but the intent of the teaching is more about telling the straying member where they are going wrong, and giving them a chance to be restored into the community. This is the step that highlights for me that these proceedings, these steps for conflict resolution, are for when someone is causing harm to another, and not just when we disagree with something someone else is doing. This final step that could end

in excommunication is not to be lived out as self-vindictiveness, or self-righteousness, but is about protecting those in our community from being harmed and giving those who did the harm a chance to be restored.

The lesson of Matthew 18:15-20 is important for each of us as individuals as we live as a part of a Christian community, but also for us as a community as a whole. This lesson is a call to deal with conflict and seek resolution and, hopefully reconciliation. It is a reminder to us that it is better to deal with the conflict, face to face and head on, than to ignore it, sweep it under the rug, and pretend to move on. As a community it is a reminder to us to not accept harm being done and do nothing about it. It is a reminder that we are allowed to be clear about how we should treat each other within our church family. That said, it is a process that focuses on restoration and reconciliation, instead of punishment. This process is a gift to the individual who was hurt, to the one who did the harm, who is being given grace to be forgiven and learn to be better, and a gift to the community who will be strengthened as a whole by the strengthening or restoration of relationships.

This process that Jesus calls us to in this passage is not easy or comfortable, and Jesus knew that and so he wastes no time in giving his own promise for where he will be in the midst of the conflict and resolution. And that is, with us! Jesus follows this tall order for conflict resolution with the assurance that he will be among us as we work through it. God cares about the ways we have been hurt and cares about the ways we are working to be better. Jesus, Emmanuel, is God with us, and does not desert us to do the hard work alone. **Jesus accompanies us into the discomfort of conflict resolution so that the whole community can be in better relationship.** In verse 18, we are told we have the authority ourselves to make decisions around discipline of members who are not living up to what it means to be in Christian community, but verse 19 tells us that we also need only ask for help. We need only ask God for the strength to confront the person who wronged us, or the transformation of our hearts to do better in not harming others. Verse 20 ends this part of the conversation, with the assurance that Jesus will be present. We can trust that Jesus is with us when we work things out as a Christian community. So, let us be brave and willing to face conflict in a healthier way with the hope of restoration, trusting that Jesus has got our backs.

Let us pray.

*Gracious and Transforming God,*

*We are just beginning the fall, a time of many beginnings and restarts, a time when our lives would usually settle down into a somewhat predictable pattern. This year things are not so predictable, yet Children are heading back to school, college students to their studies, people to their work. And it feels like life is starting to go on in a new normal.*

*Even with things different and shaken up, we are still living in community with each other and you. It is still important in this time to reflect and be sure we are living our lives and living as community as you taught us. You challenge us to do better and love us. You look at what we say and what we have done and ask us to live lives of mercy and peace. Let us bring peace and hope, taking on the struggle of conflict resolution so we can be open for healing and redemption. Walk with us, Lord, this day and all our days, as we know you have promised. Amen.*