

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 09/10/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, September 10th

Matthew 18:15-20

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Sacred nature of Christian community

We live in a culture where individual rights are emphasized more than responsibilities to one another. To compound this situation, as our society descends into tribalism, the rights of one group are increasingly pitted against the rights of another. Some people believe that if anyone disagrees with them or their agenda, they must be evil and respond accordingly. Sadly, the institutional church can often be a place of deeply entrenched conflict, whether a single congregation or the great schisms and divisions that affect entire denominations. However, avoiding conflict is sometimes more destructive than engaging in it. Great harm has resulted when the church remains silent on issues or fails to address sin. Such polarizing and destructive behaviors are in complete contrast to the approach Jesus lays out in this week's Gospel lection for dealing with tensions and disputes within His Church. This three-step approach is a means to foster reconciliation while preserving the purity and unity of the Church.

Matthew 18:15-20 Commentary

This week's Gospel lection is from the fourth of the five teaching blocks or discourses in Matthew and is often referred to as the Discourse on the Church. The context of this text is critical to our understanding. Coming immediately before the text, Jesus reveals the standard for greatness in the Kingdom is humility (18:1-4), the consequences for causing "little ones" to sin will be met with harsh punishment (5-7), and the Parable of the Lost Sheep showing no individual is expendable to God (10-14). Coming immediately after the text is the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant prompted by Peter's question about how many times he should forgive his brother. God has forgiven us and thus we are expected to extend such forgiveness to others (21-35).

The lectionary text also builds on the foundational teachings of the ethical standards of the Kingdom laid out in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) and specifically "*Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?*" (7:1-3).

¹⁵ "*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.*"

Some older texts do not include "*against you.*" The application of this text is thus beyond any personal breakdown in a relationship and applies to any sin that may be observed. Sin impacts the whole community. "*...go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone*" is the fundamental step that avoids a Christian community behaving

like a bunch of legalistic Karens! A Christian is expected to care enough about any other Christian brother or sister to be willing to have a crucial conversation in private.

In the secular world there is a tendency to avoid such conversations, either because people do not care enough to have them, or out of some misguided belief that it is being “nice” to avoid such conversations – “Bless his heart!” At the other end of the spectrum is launching a formal complaint about the individual without ever giving them the opportunity to resolve the matter privately. This type of behavior can destroy community. Love requires confrontation. It is easy to ignore, withdraw from, or complain about someone whom you do not love. The result of such conversations, even though the conversation itself may be challenging, can be a strengthened relationship. In this case the “gain” is associated with gaining a convert and thus implies being rescued from spiritual ruin.

Approaching the person directly and in private supports the Matthew 5:25 mandate for every Christian to “*come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court...*” It is only if the brother or sister does not listen that the process escalates.

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.

The next recourse is to take one or two others. Many commentators point out the connection here to Deuteronomy 19:15: “... *Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.*” Deuteronomy 19:15 deals with judicial trial. The offender in the context of Matthew 18:15-20 is not on trial. Taking one or two others is not for the purpose of establishing a charge (there may not be one or two others who witnessed the sin in the first place), but to convince the offender to listen. These others will be witnesses to the attempt the aggrieved person has made to resolve the situation. This would be important for the next step should resolution not occur.

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.

The next step is to involve the whole assembly or the congregation of disciples. The primary purpose again is to convince the offender to listen rather than for the church to administer discipline. Should the offender not listen at this stage then they must be ostracized.

At first impression this appears to suggest abandonment. A devout Jew would not associate with Gentiles or tax collectors and thus the practical implications of this metaphorical image are clear. However, the intention is to continue to have the offender in the community but keep them at a distance. Jesus never gave up on Gentiles or tax collectors neither did He distance Himself from them. Thus, even this ostracization is not meant as discipline as much as it is meant to ultimately lead to repentance and restoration. As a reminder, the Parable of the Lost Sheep comes immediately before this text (18:10-14) and immediately after this text is teaching that emphasizes the limitless times one must forgive.

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.

As in the case where this expression is used in connection with Peter’s legislative authority (16:19), Jesus is delegating authority to His disciples. In this case, the united conviction of the church has the authority to determine what is right and wrong. Notice the verbs bind and loose are associated with “*whatever*” and not “*whoever*.” This amounts to the authority to pronounce what is or is not sin rather than who is condemned and who is forgiven. Such divine authority must be exercised with great compassion to avoid abuses.

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."*

The closing verses of the text echo the two or three witnesses in v.16 and repeat how decisions on earth will be ratified in heaven. Verse 19 is sometimes presented as a formula to get our will done in heaven. This verse must be considered in the context of the discussion about a brother who has sinned. As a broader application, prayers must be consistent with the will of the name in which they are made (in Christ's name). The closing verse emphasizes the idea that spans the entire Gospel of Matthew – from the prophecy in 1:23:

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

to the closing verse of Matthew's Gospel in 28:20b:

And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Jesus is present with His Church, even if only two or three are gathered in His name.

Reflection & Application

This text reveals the uniqueness of the Christian community. Not only does this text reinforce the need to maintain the purity and unity of the community (like most religious communities do), it also reveals how this should be done with love and compassion, with the ultimate aim being restoration of the offender rather than punishment and exclusion. This process also protects the vulnerable from the powerful few from making decisions behind closed doors while at the same time it avoids rumors and gossip undermining community.

This text also reveals how Christian communities are sacred ground. Where two or more gather in Jesus' name, God is present. This is one reason why conflict needs to be addressed and addressed in a way that does not create division or destroy the community. The process outlined in the text should not be considered as a transactional, passive-aggressive mechanism through which personal rights can be defended. Rather, it reveals the responsibilities we have to one another as Christians and the concern we must have for the community. This requires a transformation in our behaviors. How we relate to one another as Christians is of fundamental concern to God. It is a matter of heart rather than rules.

Being in Christian community demands that we listen to one another. It demands that we practice mutual forbearance. It demands that we must love a brother or sister enough to engage in a crucial conversation rather than ignore what we see. It demands divisiveness cannot be tolerated. It also demands we must be willing to submit to corporate judgment.

The primary focus of the text is the responsibilities of the disciple who is sinned against. The responsibilities of the disciple doing the sinning are addressed elsewhere:

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. [Matthew 5:23-24]

This text reveals how a Christian community is meant to be different than the world. It also underscores how one cannot be a Christian outside of a Christian community.

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