

*Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, Hempstead, New York*  
*Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York*  
*Marianne K. Tomecek, Interim Pastor*

*Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 18A – September 6, 2020*

*Ezekiel 33:7-11*

*Romans 13:8-14*

*Psalm 119:33-40*

*Matthew 18:15-20*

*Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN*

In his book *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis, the late, beloved Christian apologist, “draws a stark picture of hell. Hell is like a great, vast city, Lewis says, a city inhabited only at its outer edges, with rows and rows of empty houses in the middle. These houses in the middle are empty because everyone who once lived there has quarreled with the neighbors and moved. Then, they quarreled with the new neighbors and moved again, leaving the streets and the houses of their old neighborhoods empty and barren.

“That,” Lewis says, “is how hell has gotten so large. It is empty at its center and inhabited only at the outer edges because everyone chose distance instead of honest confrontation when it came to dealing with their relationships.

‘Look, she’s the one who said that about me. Let her come and apologize!’

‘We may go to the same church, but that doesn’t mean I’ve got to share a pew with that so-and-so!’

‘It’ll be a cold day in July before I accept his apology.’”

(Hyde, Randy L., *Two or Three*, Sermons.com, Proper 18A, September 6, 2020.)

The vision of hell that Lewis painted may be an exaggeration, but the complaints about fellow members of a community probably sound familiar. It is a fact that we’re prone to have disagreements – in our families, our neighborhoods, and our churches. And then have trouble resolving them, That’s the purpose for the process Jesus provided that we’ve heard in today’s Gospel text. This process has been described by many as “church discipline” and it has been seen as the way that “troublemakers” in the church are removed from the community so as to protect it from further conflict.

But that interpretation takes the method out of Matthew’s context in Chapter 18 and it omits consideration of some very significant portions of Jesus’ teaching. Let’s take a

look at them. Earlier in chapter 18, Jesus had spoken to the disciples, who were arguing about greatness (you remember, which of the disciples would sit at Jesus's right hand when his kingdom had gained earthly power), telling them about the importance of leaders in his movement being humble. Jesus encouraged them to welcome anyone who is vulnerable, like a child, and he said that such an action would be like welcoming him. (18:1-5.) He then taught that if they were to "put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me," they'd be better off putting "a great millstone around" their necks and being "drowned in the depths of the sea." (18:6.) So even the most vulnerable – maybe including unrepentant sinners – would be treated with care.

Then Jesus told the disciples the parable about the shepherd who left 99 of his sheep to find one that had gone astray (18:1-14). Clearly, protection of the vulnerable members of the community was paramount to Jesus. And with that segue, he launched into the lesson we've heard today.

That introduction puts a whole different slant on what has been seen as a detailed procedure to hold a sinner of the holy community responsible for his or her behavior and, if he or she doesn't repent, to dismiss them from the congregation. (18:15-18.) That's how the passage was taught to me. But there's no continuity of the concerns Jesus had raised just before this passage if we see it as requiring the end of the sinner's relationship to the community of faith.

So how should we understand it? Well, we start with the premise that the church, the community of people who "believe in" Jesus, is a body united in love for one another. Paul said it to the Romans (and us): "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." (13:8.)

How do we treat people we love when they have wronged us? Sometimes, as Lewis suggested, we just give them the cold shoulder, because it seems so uncomfortable to deal with the conflict directly. If we do that enough, though, we'll shut down our own lives because we'll have retained no relationships. This is an approach that my mother would have referred to as "cutting off your nose to spite your face." In the end, we ruin the good that God has given us.

So what did Jesus mean when he concluded that if we feel that another member of the congregation has sinned against us, if we have met with him or her, one on one with no resolution; if we then have met with the person we consider to have sinned with two or three others from the congregation, again, without a solution; and if we finally have

brought the claim to the whole congregation, but the “offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector?” (18 v. 17.)

Now, wasn't it the case that Jews in Jesus' day avoided Gentiles and hated tax collectors? Yes, but did Jesus take such an approach? We considered just three weeks ago how he healed the Canaanite woman's daughter (15:21-28). Of course, that was only after he first tried to send her away without help because she was a Gentile, but finally he recognized her humanity, and saw that she and her daughter were vulnerable.

Also, an event that we haven't looked at this season, but that is found in Matthew at chapter 18:29-39, describes Jesus' healing and feeding of a crowd of at least 4000 people in Gentile territory. He provided for the vulnerable when he healed them and gave them food to ease their hunger.

And Jesus and his disciples were known to have dined with tax collectors (see Matthew 9:10), an activity that made them ritually unclean according to Torah, and the Pharisees challenged the disciples about this behavior (9:11).

The Gentiles and tax collectors Jesus interacted with weren't part of the community of Jesus' followers, but he spoke to them, healed them, ate with them: he didn't stop interacting with them and some of them became believers. In fact, his response to the Pharisees' challenge was, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>13</sup>Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” (9:12-14.)

The last three verses of our Gospel text for today also at times has been misconstrued. It is not that God will affirm our decisions about which people are to be forgiven and which are to be condemned (those who “will be bound in heaven” and “will be loosed in heaven.” (18:18.) Jesus is assuring the disciples that when they come to resolution of their dispute through Jesus' process of speaking to one another plainly and in love about their disagreements, God supports and affirms their efforts. Similarly, God will divinely support the resolutions they reach within the community of faith (18:19). And finally, this process of speaking openly and in love to resolve differences will be used *because* the church is the Body of Christ on earth, and *because* God in Christ is present where two or three of them are gathered and reach a healthy solution to the church's conflict.

This may be a difficult teaching for us in today's world. Our society encourages us, when we have a dispute with someone, to send out a tweet complaining about the person, rather than to have a face-to-face conversation about what the difference is, and

to try to reach an understanding. Our use of social media has given rise to what has been called “Cancel culture,” which is defined as “the popular practice of withdrawing support for (*canceling*) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive. *Cancel culture* is generally discussed as being performed on social media in the form of group shaming.”

(<https://www.dictionary.com/e/pop-culture/cancel-culture/>.)

“Cancellation, properly understood, refers to an attack on someone’s employment and reputation by a determined collective of critics, based on an opinion or an action that is alleged to be disgraceful and disqualifying.” (Douthat, Ross, “10 Theses About Cancel Culture,” July 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/14/opinion/cancel-culture-.html>.)

Cancellation has progressed from an attack on celebrities to assaults against ordinary people, and it is being done by young people to their classmates and former friends. Imagine how painful such shaming must be to the fragile ego of the typical teenager. (Yar, Sanam and Jonah Engel Bromwich “Tales From the Teenage Cancel Culture, October 31, 2019; up-dated November 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/style/cancel-culture.html>.)

It seems to me that Cancel culture is the exact opposite of what Jesus described as the way to deal with grievances. It is an attack on another person, that is totally without love. It is a way of destroying life that is contrary to the existence proclaimed in the word of the Lord as spoken by Ezekiel: “As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die...?” (33:11.)

So it is, as the Body of Christ, that we come together to hear God’s word; to receive God’s forgiveness and to share that forgiveness with one another. In fact, next week we’ll consider Jesus’ response to the frustrated Peter, who asked, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven (18:21-22.)

Jesus’ response doesn’t sound like he recommends dismissing a brother or sister in Christ from the congregation even if they continue to sin against a member. In fact, it sounds like taking the opposite approach and removing a stumbling block for the person who is vulnerable because of his or her tendency to sin again and again.

In contemplating Jesus’ process for reconciliation and instruction about forgiveness this week, I thought again about how many times Christians of color and indigenous

believers have talked to “white” Christians about the sins we have committed against them: sins of genocide, slavery, racism, murder (through lynching, massacres, police violence against unarmed civilians or otherwise), legislation imposing intentional economic inequity, housing and employment discrimination, unequal health care, prejudice and on and on.

I thought again, about how many times we “white” people in the United States who claimed and continue to claim to be brothers and sisters in Christ have not listened to our siblings in Christ against whom we have sinned, how often we have not heard their truths and how many, long years we have continued our unholy behavior and have not repented of our sin. And yet, we have expected to remain part of the church of Jesus Christ, part of the Body of Christ in this country. In fact, we have expected to be the leaders of Christ’s church and have not welcomed indigenous siblings and siblings of color into equal partnership. We have not expected these siblings to have full participation in the very church that, if we had listened, would have taught us how we white Christians had sinned and have sinned and continue to sin against our siblings.

We are saved only by God’s grace and by Christ’s desire to have his followers keep trying to live in peace, learning to respect the integrity of each of our sisters and brothers. I pray that the movement that seems to be growing in our country will continue to spread and to convict each of us so that we will repent and begin to find the ways we can build Christ’s church in the future.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: Amen