

Pentecost 15 – September 10 – Matthew 18-15-20, Romans 3: 7-14

Someone has imagined the Carpenter's tools holding a conference. Brother Hammer presided. Several suggested he leave the meeting because he was too noisy. Replied the hammer, "If I have to leave this shop, Brother Screw must go also. You have to turn him around again and again to get him to accomplish anything."

Brother Screw then spoke up. "If you wish, I'll leave. But Brother Plane must leave too. All his work is on the surface. His efforts have no depth."

To this Brother Plane responded, "Brother Rule will also have to withdraw, for he is always measuring folks as though he were the only one who is right."

Brother Rule then complained against Brother Sandpaper, "You ought to leave too because you're so rough and always rubbing people the wrong way."

In the midst of all this discussion, in walked the Carpenter of Nazereth. He had arrived to start his days work. Putting on his apron, He went to the bench to make a pulpit from which to proclaim the Gospel. He employed the hammer, screw, plane, rule, sandpaper, and all the other tools. After the day's work when the pulpit was finished, Brother Saw arose and remarked, "Brethren, I observe that all of us are workers together with the Lord."¹

Church is a community that must strive to not let sin separate us from one another. Today's text from Matthew 18 is a text that has traditionally been used to deal with church discipline. It is even written into our church constitution. But the text this

¹Leslie B. Flynn, *19 Gifts of the Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1974) p. 28.

morning is much more about reconciliation and saving the lost than discipline. Let me explain.

If we look at the five verses before our text and the two verses after, we hear verses 18:15-20 differently. Jesus tells of the Parable of the Lost Sheep and Forgiveness. Let me read Matthew 18:10-15 and 18: 22-23 to you:

The Parable of the Wandering Sheep

¹⁰“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. [¹¹]

¹²“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? ¹³And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

The Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant are parables of extreme grace. The shepherd left ninety-nine sheep on the mountain top to search for the lost one. He trusted that they would be fine while he searched for the little lamb. And when the shepherd found the sheep he rejoiced over more than the ninety-nine.

If the parable shows us the nature of God (his desire for no one to be lost), our text from Matthew 18:15-20 takes on a different meaning.

Contentiousness in the congregation? Disagreements about the purpose and mission of the church? We live in a combative, quarrelsome age where there are some deep divides and sometimes those divisions afflict the church. But I'm wondering if some of the contentiousness and divisiveness we sometimes suffer is an expected spinoff of Jesus Christ's wildly expansive notion of salvation.

Jesus is why we are here in the first place. He has assembled us. We are here, not because we are all in agreement with one another but because Jesus is determined to assemble, congregate, and gather a group of people who are to live in the world in his name. If we've got a savior who sets out to seek, find, and save the lost (Luke 19:10), who was criticized because of the company he kept at table but smirked, "If you are well, you don't need a doctor," (Matt 9:12, paraphrased), well, expect that sometimes there'll be trouble among those gathered at the Lord's table. Jesus says, in effect, "I've not come for good, respectable, Bible-believing, justice-advocating, or hypersensitive-to-other-people's-wounds church people. I've come for sinners, only sinners."

Never once did Jesus command us to love the lovely, loveable, and loving. Never did he allow his disciples to waste time attempting to determine which sin was the worst or who to ban from being a disciple. All he did was to love. Particularly notable was his love for the unlovely and unlovable and unloved. And then he turned around and commanded us to do the same.

Division is easy, a natural propensity in a culture of rugged individualism, consumerism, political factionalism, and self-protectiveness from discomfoting truth. Togetherness is hard. Congregating requires empowerment from outside ourselves. The one who loves us together and calls us together can enable us to love together. Not I “but Christ lives in me” (Gal 3:20), Paul told the Galatians.

Christ’s propensity to congregate his followers, to save and to deploy us together, means that you can expect differences and disagreements, arguments, and dissension. Be surprised when we’re all on the same page about anything other than Jesus. I expect that many of you have found, right here in our congregation, that our differences can be life-giving. Come to our church, join us in debating, listening, and you can expect to be corrected and thereby brought closer to Jesus by a fellow Christian who may not be your type.

Come on now. How would you have grown and matured in faith without the jostling and insight that you received along the way from pesky preachers, and contentious fellow congregants, whom God used to say things to you that you didn’t want to hear?

Consensus is not our reason for gathering as a congregation. The sole source of togetherness: Jesus Christ has convened us, breathed upon us, and has sent us forth in mission.

My ideal church member is that person who is able to love Christ enough to say, “While I don’t agree with you (as best I understand your stance from your rather incoherent sermons), since Jesus Christ has brought us together (without giving either

of us much choice in the matter) and then commanded us to stay together in love (even though it would be easier to keep to ourselves), I'll keep talking, continue listening, and praying that we will grow more committed to Christ together.”

The most challenging aspect of being commissioned by Christ is to be gathered by Christ with those with whom we have little in common other than Christ. Whatever work Christ does in the world, he chooses to do it in concert with a choir that he assembles. He comes to us, busting through our locked doors, breathes his Holy Spirit upon us, and commissions us to work with him together.

Let us be disciples – individuals and yet united as the Body of Christ. Amen.