

Date: September 6, 2020

Reading: Matthew 18:15 – 20

Theme: Regaining a friend



The Inquisition in Europe in the 13th to 15th Centuries was a brutal attempt to make the church pure in theology and doctrine. The Salem witch trials of the 17th Century was a similarly brutal attempt to purge the church and community of the sin of witchcraft. While nowhere near as brutal, similar, public, attempts to purge churches and church institutions of sexual and moral sin through expulsions and sackings happen regularly, from churches asking members who seek a divorce to leave the church right up to the current push to sack Jerry Falwell Jr as President of the US evangelical Liberty University over a sex scandal. Armed with an Old Testament based concept of holiness and purity and legalism, members of the church throughout the ages have resorted to judgement and power to cleanse the church of sin. Right down to Mrs Smith refusing to sit near Mrs Jones in church because, "I saw her last week shamefully cavorting with a young man in the supermarket."

Yes, we are forgiven through the grace of God demonstrated on the cross. Yes, we are welcomed into the community of those who are forgiven and seeking to live in union with God as the Body of Christ. Yes, we are called to follow the will of God and seek the ways of truth and honesty and respect, and resist evil. But we are human. We are weak and fallible and subject to the distractions of the world. And surely, knowing we are weak and fallible, removes any basis for judgement of another weak and fallible, forgiven member of the body of Christ. For the sake of the Body, in response to the God's mission of reconciliation, our reaction when a brother or sister in Christ does something wrong is to seek understanding, recognition of fault, and reunion with the community.

I have been a member of many churches, Christian communities, and I have seen acrimony, gossip, disappointment, and anger in response to issues of behaviour that many would call sin. I have seen splits and angry fights over issues of church policy or doctrine. And I have grieved because surely anger and judgement and gossip and division are just as big an example of sin as the issue that caused the controversy in the first place. We are in community not because we share the same culture or interests or life situation, or any other reason for a social group. We are in community because we have been called, forgiven, and gathered in and through Jesus Christ, with all our differences of culture, upbringing, politics, personality, and experience of God. And all those issues are potential points of friction and conflict. And one of the biggest potential points of friction is the belief that we are all nice, loving Christians and there shouldn't be any conflict. Issues get swept away, hidden, or ignored for the sake of harmony.

We need a way to deal with our differences that both respects the Word and Way of God and respects the differences and weaknesses of the very human people of God. That was the great learning of Matthew's community in the first century. Unlike every other grouping in society, the church was full of differences and only united in faith, but they recognised the importance

of that faith, and the dominant ideas of forgiveness and compassion, and developed a process that was not about blame and judgement and discipline, but was about restitution, reconciliation and preserving the unity of the Body of Christ.

Possibly the oldest, original version of this teaching from Jesus about dealing with wrongs in the community is the simple statement in Luke:

If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive.

And for twelve men following Jesus around the countryside, that may have worked well, but in a the heat and pressure of a new, multicultural, multi-socio-economic, multi-gendered community of Jews and gentiles in a Roman town, how does it work? Who sets the standards? Who determines what is a sin? If Jesus has released us from the burden of the Law, what is our rebuke based on? And these new communities of faith in Jesus Christ had to hammer out definitions and processes and agreements, not just about what they believed but about how they would live together. Not just the faith was new, the church was a whole new thing.

It is easy to imagine that someone acting in a way that was a part of their culture and heritage could be perceived by someone else as sin. And so a process of listening, and hearing other opinions, and praying in the presence of the Risen Christ, opens up new understandings and opportunities for the community as a whole to learn and to pronounce the acceptability or otherwise of behaviours and practices. And, if the behaviour in question is clearly wrong, then the process of starting in private and then moving to a small group of confidants, who also pray as a group of 2 or 3 in the presence of Christ, preserves the integrity and honour of the person and gives them an opportunity to see the wrong, to apologise and to remain as a member of the community. You can't be said to represent a loving, forgiving God, who deals with each person as an individual, by jumping up in a community gathering and accusing someone of a sin! Or worse, by gossiping behind their back and spreading rumours.

There are several ways to do a disservice to this text from Matthew. One is to read the opening 'if' as a remote possibility. Experience says this passage could open with 'when'. We are human. We have weaknesses and failings and we can fall into doing things that are wrong, even things that offend or hurt other members of the community. Another disservice is to not recognise that Matthew has placed it alongside the parable of the lost sheep. We are human but we are also called to forgiveness and compassion and restitution – the prime motive of this 'process' is to regain a member of the community. And a third way to do a disservice is to read it as a process for ex-communication; the steps we must take to throw someone out of the church. When we read that the final step is to 'let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector', that doesn't mean thrown out of the church. Consider that sinners, Gentiles, and tax collectors are among the people that Jesus shared his ministry with. Indeed, the very people he shared meals with. It may be a code to treat the accused as no longer being a member of the community, but it also means share the Gospel with them again – 're-evangelise'. Begin

the process of membership and training and understanding all over again. Like the lost sheep, put the work into bringing them back into the community.

We are broken people united in community through the forgiveness and grace of God. With all our differences we are gathered in and around Jesus Christ, and the table of fellowship, and ways to address failings and problems and conflicts that don't produce even bigger problems like judgement and gossip and splits in the body of Christ are welcome, and a further example of the grace of God. We are the people of reconciliation and that reconciliation needs to live in every action and decision and conflict in the community if we are to show the love of God to the world. Look how they love each other means so much more when that love encompasses difference and failure. Let love fulfil our obligations to each other as members of the Body of Christ.

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