

“Not Even One” – Mat 18:15-20

I have a snap quiz for you this morning. Those of you who are very “in touch” with your feelings and emotions will likely find this easy; others of you may have to work a bit. The quiz? I want you to reach back and identify how you were feeling as we heard the words from Matthew’s gospel. Can you recall those feelings? Can you identify and name them? Did you feel the same at the end as you did at the beginning?

I’d bet that many of you felt a little uneasy as the passage opened with “If another member of the church sins against you ...”, possibly for a number of reasons. Some of you might have experienced such a situation – from either side of the equation. Others might be a tad uneasy at the very idea. But even if neither of these situations apply to you, I suspect your unease might well have deepened to discomfort as the words continued to unfold, laying out a specific course of escalating action until the miscreant was to be treated “like a Gentile or tax collector.”

Whatever our feelings were, I think all of us breathe a sigh of relief as we get to the end of this little passage, hearing an oft-repeated comforting promise that as we gather together Jesus will be with us. But have you ever had a little bit of discomfort even with this closing reassurance, wondering if this means that Jesus might not be with you, nor give you what you desperately ask for when you are all alone?

This is a troubling little passage, and it doesn’t seem to get much better when you start digging – at least not at first. I suspect most preachers are aware of the unease and the discomfort in the pews, and so move quickly to the closing line without recognizing or acknowledging the difficulties. To do so, however, does a great disservice to this excerpt from Matthew’s gospel and too easily misses the message of grace. So let’s dig a lot deeper and see if you can recognize that message of grace with me.

To be sure ... at first hearing this is definitely an uncomfortable passage. Some words come readily to mind to describe the attitudes in the text, including harsh, rule-based, exclusive, and elitist. The harshness derives from an apparent coldness implied by the procedural or polity nature of the instructions, escalating a problem until there seems to be an irresolvable conflict. The apparent call to shunning seems to convey a disturbing sense of exclusion, capable of dropping people who do not fit in or “toe the line.” The promise of power to convict or pardon people of sins carries with it a powerful sense of elitism, of identifying some with control over others.

All too sadly, many if not most people outside the Christian church view the church as exhibiting these very characteristics. Talk to people who do not attend church and you will hear if not these negative words of elitism, exclusiveness, or judgmentalism then you will likely hear descriptions or even accusations that are similar in nature. Part of the reason for this is that for many years in the recent past, and by much of the modern church as well, these characteristics do reflect attitudes and behaviours held and practiced by Christian faithful. A strong and well-defined declaration of who is “in” and who is “out” is echoed by significant branches of the church. Rules and procedures for defining how others should be treated are sometimes very open and clear, other times much more subtle but no less powerfully enforced.

What is even sadder is that this legalistic and hurtful elitism, underpinned by exclusiveness and shunning, is often based on a complete misinterpretation of this very passage from Matthew’s gospel, caused both by ignoring certain very clear details in the passage and by taking it completely out of context. Let’s take a deeper and broader look at what Jesus is being quoted as saying, and see if we can recognize the message of grace that so many miss.

The first really crucial detail that is missed is that this message is not about who is to be considered to be “in” the church or “not in” the church. Note how it begins, “If another member of the church . . .” This message is meant to help define relationships within the church, not between the church and others. Yes, there are some rules given about how to proceed, and there is both fairness and respect involved, especially in the early stages. Talking privately between the parties is a good and private way to seek to resolve an issue. Of course that does not always work as agreement may not be found, in which case bringing in some who may be able to help find a resolution through mediation is also a good move. We do need to acknowledge that sometimes people, including people of faith, act improperly and hurtfully towards others, and if they are not willing or able to stop doing so then the church at large needs to be warned in order to protect the vulnerable.

So far, so good. These are reasonable steps, and indeed even our own denominational polity reflects this advice. But it is when we get to the part about “treat them like Gentiles and tax collectors” that things start to go “off the rails.” For the most part people in the church have considered this particular instruction to mean isolating and rejecting those who would not recant, and then extended it to mean isolating and rejecting those who wouldn’t even participate in the church. However, we need to step back and ask ourselves “how exactly did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?” When we do so through looking at the scriptural record, we discover that Jesus treated both Gentiles and tax collectors with grace, compassion, tolerance, and even acceptance. In fact, he was accused and condemned by the religious authorities for his associations with both – eating and drinking with them, even staying at their homes for days on end. Far from excluding either Gentiles and tax collectors, Jesus included them in the circle of those who would listen and dialogue with him about the nearness and the wonder of the kingdom of God.

Part of the reason the church, and people of faith within the church, started to misinterpret this passage so badly is due to the most common misuse of scripture – namely taking isolated bits out of context and using those bits as weapons to beat others into submission. To prevent ourselves doing the same we need to identify the context for this passage and set it firmly into that context. How many of you – without opening your bibles – can identify what Jesus had to say immediately before what he says here? I admit, I had to look it up myself, and I was pleasantly surprised at what I found.

The discussion of which our reading today is but a small part begins with the disciples asking Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” To answer them, Jesus called a child and set the child in the middle of them. Using that child as an example, Jesus went on to tell them that unless they changed and became like children they would never enter the kingdom of heaven – with the additional clarification that it was humility that was the key. Humility – now there’s an opposite to elitism and exclusiveness! Warming to his subject, Jesus went on to warn the disciples – and thus anyone who would claim to be a follower – of the dangers of putting a stumbling block in the path of one with a child-like humility; so much so that he elaborated about cutting off the offending hand or putting out the offending eye. His advice was perfectly clear: “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.” Whew! That’s pretty clearly in contrast to the aloofness of those who reject and shun Gentiles and tax collectors! Jesus then goes on to clarify God’s motivation that lies underneath all this tough talk using the example of not only leaving the ninety-nine sheep on the hillside to go and seek the one that is

lost but of the special rejoicing over finding that one more than over those that never went astray. The crux of that message is clearly that God wants to lose not even one person.

Now, with that message of inclusive grace ringing in their ears, the disciples heard how to work with those in the church who might wander off the hillside. With the message of inclusive grace ringing in your ears, can you now hear today's little passage differently? Can you, with the instructions set firmly in the context of the importance of receiving each and every humble person, including those who are prone to wander astray, as though you were receiving Christ himself? This is not a message of exclusion, it was offered as a guide to redemption and reconciliation, complete with the assuring promise that such reconciliation carries with it the joy of Christ's own presence.

And so the challenge lies before us. Actually, a number of challenges lie before us: how to help the world at large – and harder yet the church at large – hear the message of grace and inclusion when for so many years the message that has been proclaimed is the opposite? As with so much of our faith experiences, the answer is to begin small, and with ourselves. Begin by hearing the message of grace, by hearing that receiving each person who hears the stirrings of faith with the tenderness of receiving a fragile child, knowing that in Christ's eyes that child or child-like person is most precious. Begin by forgiving the sins of others, in the hope that in experiencing that grace they may become able to forgive also. Begin by reaching out to others, recognizing that in their frailty they would like to be treated with the same compassion and acceptance that you would like to experience in your frailty. Above all, understand that Jesus' message is about reconciliation – each one with God, and each one with another, and that in that reconciliation and in the company of one another gathered in his name, he will be and is present with us – all thanks be to God!