

15th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 18A
Sermon 9.10.23

Matthew 18:15-20

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (178)

A little book, a copy of which I receive every few years as a gift because someone has come across it in a used bookstore and has thought of me: *New England's Monterey: The Town—Its Church*.

Sponsored by Monterey Congregational Church, the book was written by Julius Miner and Margery Mansfield. It's undated, but I'd guess it was commissioned in 1950, since the last date it mentions is 1948 and 1950 would have been the 200th anniversary of the church. Part history, part folktale, it evokes what life must have felt like for a tiny New England town prior to paved roads, the proliferation of cars, and the mobility of goods even across great distances.

These people *depended* on one another. Winters were long, the growing seasons were short. When nearly everyone was healthy and able to contribute to the sort of industriousness circumstance demanded of them, life was good. When people would fall out of such industriousness, everyone suffered.

A story unfolds about the proliferation of apples.

Apples first came to New England in 1628, along with other fruits from England. But most especially there was the apple, which, according to Miner and Mansfield, “both blessed and cursed our local people.”

“When the first apple trees planted in town began to bear fruit, apples were highly esteemed; a few were stored in cellars; some were made into applesauce, then stored in a barrel, and frozen to eat through the winter; many were sliced and dried for apple pies. The skins, cores, and discards were fed to the cattle, and as they wandered about, little apple trees came up with their droppings. Soon the town was covered in wild apple trees. Cows were ravenous for the wild apples and ate so many that some became drunk and their milk dried off. Men picked up the apples to keep them from the cows. Cider mills started up around the town...” while also apple cider vinegar found more and more uses.

“In the process of making vinegar the cider is fermented, and as it begins to ferment it tastes better and better. In fact, to some it tasted so good they could not leave it alone, and by overindulgence became intoxicated. And of all the disagreeable people the cider-drinker is one of the worst.

“About this time, a distillery was started to make cider brandy, then demijohns were seen in town...Anyone trading at the village store was welcome to help himself from the demijohn. One night, the mill where paper was made from rye straw went up in flames. It was proven that the men employed were intoxicated and that they had set it afire.

“Then the local market for rye straw was gone and with it the incentive for raising rye. Home-made rye bread became less used. Discouragement among the people increased, with their youth becoming more intemperate. With the intemperance, poverty and sorrow were inevitable.

“More members of the community joined the ranks of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union...,” and when the town voted to become officially “dry,” “One strong-minded woman took an axe, went down cellar (where cider barrels were in storage) and chopped open the heads of two barrels of hard cider.

“The cider gushed,” our writers tell us flatly. “The men stayed sober.”

It is easy to think the admonishing Jesus has in mind here is about busy-bodies and marmish people who really just need to mind their own business. “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault...”

Imagine instead being so closely tied to your neighbor that their well-being is very much your concern, and your wellbeing is very much their concern. Survival depends on it. Thriving certainly depends on it. If you fall through the thin ice of life and livelihood, everyone else risks falling through as well.

We are in what’s called the Community Discourse of Matthew’s gospel. Here Jesus addressed the community that would come to be called the church.

Matthew is alone in calling forth such an intentional gathering, “the church,” such that it even has a name. *Ekkelesia* is the Greek word that Matthew is alone in having used, a word that translates into “assembly” or “gathering” or indeed “church.” None of the other gospel writers, neither Mark nor Luke nor John, call forth such a body as this.

When it comes to Jesus and what he was about in the world, Mark understands him as a one-man show, a singular manifestation of the Kingdom of God, an immediate making present the reign of God. Luke understands an intermediary in the Holy Spirit, an entity of God emanating

and thus working amidst history and empowering human thought and action. John has Jesus even more reliant on the Holy Spirit to empower the believers in Jesus to act by their new conviction.

But Matthew:

for his part, he imagines the church—first gathered by Jesus when he was alive in the world, and then authorized by Jesus to continue to act on his behalf, and indeed in whose actions are the bringing into history the on-going grace of the eternal. Right here is the vector. Right here is to be the transmission of the eternal to the temporal and the temporal into the eternal, what bound here also bound in heaven, what let loose here also let loose in heaven. Right here among us: the reign of God made real now.

So, here we are, in the Community Discourse, a portion of Matthew's gospel where we are midway, past the point of no return. Jesus has turned his face to Jerusalem. From now on, his wandering ministry would be a purposeful journey—to Jerusalem, to the cross. This, of course, would have him also beginning to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Three times he would tell them this. Three times the disciples would have a muddled response to this most puzzling turn of events. And it's within this tryptic framework that Jesus speaks of the community he means to gather. As if anticipating the enervation that might come upon them once he'd gone, or the confusion or the what-have-you the community would likely feel following his death and his rising, he would begin now to tell them how they should continue to behave, and moreover with what aim they should have in mind to inspire their continued gathering.

It's easy to detect in this rendering of the Greek original an apparent concern on Jesus' part with the likelihood of conflict in the church. "If another member of the church sins *against you*," he seems to say here, as if the challenge he anticipated was one person causing offense to another and what conflict that could result in.

And there is in the church—offense caused, resulting conflict. There is, of course, the very likelihood of conflict—which is news to some people, shocking news to lots of church-types. It's not uncommon among church people to think our highest aim is all just to get along. Which is fine, as far as it goes—getting along. It just doesn't happen to go that far. No, better still than getting along is abiding together in truth and love.

Which is why this rendering of the gospel reading we just heard isn't quite what Jesus likely said. Earlier transcripts don't have "against you" here. Earlier transcripts simply read: "If another member of the church sins, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Which suggests—to me at least—that as concerning as the likelihood of conflict was for the integrity and health of the whole body of Christ, far more of concern was the likelihood of sin, that persistent, pervasive tendency toward destruction, toward death. Yes, far more of concern was the sort of tendency and behavior that would cause some members of the body to fall away, to become disconnected, or better perhaps to say to become dis-membered from the body, this spiritual body that is so largely about *re*-membrance.

It's not for nothing this sort of behavior is called in the gospel a fault—as in fault line, that place of potential separation, dismembering.

So, mind you, this concern, this alertness to sin and a falling away: this wasn't a religious conviction, or a pious, squeamish conviction. It wasn't motivated by doctrinal or ideological chauvinism: "Our way is the best way! Our beliefs are the only true beliefs!" This wasn't a matter of having right ideas, and making sure everybody else had right ideas and if they began to have wrong ideas, they got re-catechized. No, this was about abiding together, and each member living life in such a way as made that abiding together less impossible.

It is difficult to sustain life-long close relationship!

Let it be said as well that this would also, sometimes, be about survival in a brutal world, a world where no one makes it alone. Self-made man myths aside, we are none of us able to do this on our own, to say nothing of thriving on our own. The current epidemic of loneliness across much of the western industrialized world, and the recent spike in the United States at least of so called "deaths of despair:" these are proving to our busy, prosperous, ambitious society and citizens to a painful degree that we are indeed essential to one another, proving it such a degree that we can no longer ignore it. Big as we are as a landmass and a society, it's becoming less and less plausible, except to the most delusional billionaires, that we can do this on our own. We can't! And we certainly can't do this *joyfully* on our own.

But if that is *now* a piece of truth in need of frequent declaring, it was then as well, in Jesus' time. It wasn't a given then that people would love each other any more than it is a given now. No, because the world-changing idea that the church lived out was this: that we are indeed to be our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper. And not just as it regards the brothers and sisters we might know, but also the ones who are strangers in our midst. And now, with the church,

empowered by a boundless Holy Spirit, there was a means, a politics, for calling forth and living into such unbounded love.

Prior to the coming of the church, this wide-ranging concern for the other simply wouldn't have made any sense, to say nothing of having gained any real traction. People in the Roman world wouldn't have been so apt to think about other people as having feelings just like themselves, feeling pain just as they did, suffering all the things any of us might suffer. Empathy wasn't really an activity brought to everyday living. Imagining the experience of the other was a luxury not many people could afford—

or would even want to. It can be quite painful to open your heart to the experience of others—because not everyone has it all that good in life. No, in fact, most people, in that time, were dealing with enough of their own pain, or at least discomfort, thank you very much. Embodied living was a long series of discomforts, and even threats.

It's easier now, in some ways, I suppose, for some of us. As for those others, well, maybe they just haven't made good choices, which is on them, right?

(A bit of dialogue from a tv show whose trailer I saw once, two women in an argument, one woman, defensive, "I made good choices!" and the other snapping back, "No, you *had* good choices!")

Concern for the other: empathy, that imaginative leap into another's experience: I actually got some pretty good advice about that once. Tobias was a toddler, I was pregnant with Jack, and a family who lived down the street from where I grew up lost their youngest daughter, who was then a young adult. I'd been her babysitter back in the day. And now she was dead. Heart failure. So unexpected!

I traveled to my home town to go her funeral.

I moved through the receiving line, which was *miles* long, slow and patient. I reached her mother and, teary, I said, "I can't imagine it."

She looked at me, looked at my pregnant belly, and she said, "Don't," which I took as permission, as grace.

We don't always need to imagine our way into others' suffering. We can be judicious about when to do so, judicious about *why* to do so, when such empathy serves some good and when it's gratuitous, either voyeuristic or merely draining of hope, hope which is essential.

But as a way of life, were we to turn off our empathy for others, were we to convince ourselves not to care when our neighbor "sins," which is to say when our neighbor falls into that

web of sin and darkness, of destruction whether chosen or forced, it would make what's hard about life even harder.

On the whole, we should imagine what life is like for other people, as if we were invested in the life and success of other people.

As the church, we definitely should.

It's useful to hear in Jesus' anticipating the sort of sin that is rightly met with admonishing that he wasn't encouraging people to be scolds to one another but was encouraging people to encourage one another about what contributes to life and to discourage them away from what drains it.

This is difficult to do. This is a delicate thing. It always is. I'm sure it always has been. As for now, when it comes to how we live in this society, it's difficult and delicate because few are the people who have such authority in our lives, few are the people whom each of us has authorized to do this in our regard—to correct us, to admonish us. I haven't actually authorized my next-door neighbor to take note of when I seem slothful or enervated, the weeds growing, the backyard furniture knocked over in last week's wind. I haven't actually given the authority to my grocer to note when I'm buying more Doritos than broccoli. I depend on my UPS delivery person to be discrete about the number of boxes from Amazon recently delivered. Healthful living, pro-social living, is really each of ours to decide upon how to do. It's none of anyone else's business. It's none of your business!

This, we call freedom.

I'm not convinced Jesus would.

The church is a gathering of people authorizing one another to serve in this way, to notice when "sin" seems to be holding sway, to care when something destructive seems to have been let loose in someone's life, and to approach such problems with discretion and wisdom, with intention and compassion—

for calling such things out is itself a risk. When you name a dynamic, you sort of own that dynamic. You name it, you claim it.

Jesus seems to have understood this. In giving us a formula for calling out what more often seeks to remain in the shadows, Jesus seems to have understood that calling such things out comes with risk and so should be done with care. First, simply approach that person and name the thing that causes concern, that brings even some danger. If the person won't listen, bring one or two

others, members of the community who also recognize and even feel the risk and who care for the offender and want for wellbeing.

If the person still won't listen, bring the matter before the whole assembly, every person who has something at stake in the matter.

And if then the person still won't listen, still won't turn away from the thing bringing threat, then the person would be lost to the community and the relational tether would come undone. And this is the worst possible outcome. And it would sometimes come to that.

But even then, the result should simply be that the person is as a tax collector or a Gentile, which is to say let to live but on their own terms. Those remaining in right relationship shouldn't seek to punish, shouldn't seek vengeance, should simply let go, should simply peacefully coexist.

Jesus would be leaving them. This most clearly authoritative person in their midst would be gone—which would unleash all sorts of questions. Who's in charge, and why? What is that person authorized to do, and what are the limits of that person's authority, and where does freedom come into play?

And what about the spiritual gifts that come to each person in though different form and different measure? These, which would have authority rest on each person though at different times to different temporal ends.

Yet all of this is to serve the same ultimate end, the reign of God come bringing all in to praise, gathering all in to life fulfilled, love unfurled, such that all that seems beyond hope or laid to waste or utterly beyond redemption are now folded back in to make sense and to have found purpose in the mind and heart of God.

This is our end. This is our charge, and most challengingly with a dynamic, ever moving cast of character who will be in charge: Alleluia! Alleluia!

This is our aim. This is our end.

Now, to get there...

Thanks be to God.