

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 23
Pastor Nancy R. Easton

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Ezekiel 33:7-11; Psalm 119:33-40;
Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A page of homework due today. Kitchen utensils. A scrap of paper with a phone number on it. An old toy, much beloved. Operating instructions for a new gadget. A magazine, yet unread. Receipts for clothing recently purchased. Orthodontic appliances. These objects may seem disparate and unrelated, but they do have something in common: they are all objects my family and I have retrieved from the garbage.

There is nothing quite so enjoyable as sticking your hands in the garbage cans outside our house, sorting through the messy hodgepodge of stuff tossed in order to find the elusive object you never intended to throw away, or the thing you new you threw away but suddenly desperately needed. But great is the victory when the object is found, and greater still the feeling when you hands are thoroughly washed and dried.

When a close relative of mine gave my sister-in-law a set of real silver silverware, Jessica began to bring that silverware to our extended family gatherings at Christmas and Thanksgiving and Easter. Jessica takes charge of placing the silverware in all the spots around the table, as well as removing the silverware, hand washing and drying, polishing and shining, and then placing each piece, counting them one-by-one, until they are in the felt-lined box. Not because Jessica enjoys the task, but because one year one knife went into the garbage. Oh, you should have heard the hue and cry, the fussing! And then there was the digging and the rooting, until finally that object was found in one of the many garbage bags at my other sister-in-law's house. Frankly, having inexpensive stainless steel silverware is really just fine with me. We have lost our share of them, we will continue to do so, but I understood Jessica's desire to search and rescue in the garbage. The agony of such messing digging and rooting was worth the outcome of a treasured object found.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus speaks to the ongoing challenge of living in community – and it's not just any old community, it's the Church! And while the Church is the creation of a perfect God through the astounding power of the Holy Spirit, and while the Church is called the Body of Christ, it is clear in Matthew's congregation, and it is clear to our Lord Jesus Christ, that the Church is not perfect. Like any other community, it's prone to the pressures of human failings. Like any other community, it is susceptible to sin and division. People who can be so like-minded in view of the fact that they all love God, often act as if they don't love, or even like, each other!

And when that lack of love (or like) breaches the top of our tolerance for one another, members of the Church walk away. Sometimes they just walk away but are still in the confines of the church building. Sometimes they walk out of the congregation completely. And sometimes, just

before they walk away, words are spoken and deeds are done that further the divide and further fracture the Body of Christ. The relationship that once existed between the people of God is lost.

So Jesus offers an imperfect Church a way of being the Church. Now the context of this passage we have today is crucial. Context is everything. We begin at the 15th verse of Chapter 18, but I'm going to take you back to the first verse of Chapter 18 in Matthew's gospel, which opens with the disciples asking Jesus this question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" That's what they want to know. Doesn't that give us some helpful insight as to what's going to follow here? See, the disciples haven't gelled as a group yet; they aren't unified in spirit yet. About the only thing they can agree on is that they're all focused on this question: Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? Who's going to be the top dog? Jesus knows what could happen in a group of followers which focuses only on that question. There could be grappling for power and control. There could be self-promotion and self-righteousness. There could be pushing and shoving others aside. You practically taste the conflict that's going to ensue! But God will have none of that in His Church. There is to be a caring for, a mutuality and an equality among His people. So first Jesus, at the beginning of Chapter 18, tells the disciples that they are to welcome any little one who comes in his name, any little one who comes in faith. They are not permitted to be stumbling blocks for other people who desire to know God and follow Him, too.

Second, Jesus gives an image of a shepherd who leaves behind 99 sheep so he can go find the one sheep that is lost, that has wandered away and gone astray. Like our reaching down into the messy depths of that garbage and discovering the silver knife, great is the victory, and greater still the joy when the lost is found.

And then we get to today's portion of the scripture, and it is here that Jesus describes a way of handling conflict in the community; conflict that may or may not have already resulted in a division or a walking away from one another. He says, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out that fault when the two of you are alone . . ."

That piece and the entire line of advice that follows is written up in most congregations' constitutions as about a way of dealing with conflict in our congregations. You know, we often hone in on the words of this very first section, "If another member of the church sins against you . . .", which implies they did something to us and we were in the right. The word for "sin" here is better translated a "missed the mark", "failed", meaning, in other words, this brother or sister failed in our eyes, and that really could mean just about anything. It could mean that they hurt our feelings, or acted grievously and sinfully against us; it could mean simply that they disappointed us; or they made a mistake that offended us; or they didn't live up to our expectations. I think many times, when we're talking about conflict in the church, it's not so much that one person sinned and the other didn't, or that one person is wrong and the other is right, but many times the truth of the situation is found somewhere in between the stories of the one who was wronged and the one who stands accused.

Rather than zeroing in on the words "If another member of the church sins against you . . .", I'd rather we would concentrate on what Jesus said right after that, that it is better to concentrate on the sheer, hard, messy work of reconciliation – "go to that person alone". Jesus calls His

followers to truth-telling and honesty when there is conflict. Now while it is our first inclination to go and complain about that person with every other person but that person, Jesus tells us to go to that person and be up front and honest and talk with him.

That's not easy for us to do, even if we think we are fairly up front and honest, or believe we have very strong interpersonal communication skills, or even if we've been taught to use the "I feel" statements as opposed to the "you. . ." statements – you know, saying "I feel hurt when you blah, blah, blah" as opposed to "You bozo, you did thus and such". We *know* all the right things to say, but it's much easier to vent about that person to someone else than to look that person in the eye and genuinely express concern about their actions, what has happened, our relationship. Most of us are just not very good at it. Most of us just don't want to get involved in the sheer hard messy work of healing a rift. Yet Jesus says this is the way we are to be, in order to be the Church.

And after Jesus lays out that instruction, he says, "If the member listens to you, you have regained that one." As difficult as it may be to face a person squarely and honestly, not vindictively but honestly, as difficult as that may be for us, Jesus understands how great the victory, and greater still the joy when the relationship is restored. What was nearly thrown away in a fit of anger or disagreement or indifference has now been found, and it was worth the work. It was worth the messy, sometimes agonizing work to find it.

Jesus' work with us, to regain us, was messy and agonizing. He faced tremendous conflict all along the way with the religious authorities who questioned his every move, his every motive, and his very identity. But his courage in dealing head on in that conflict, and his truth-telling about God runs straight through Matthew's Gospel. You look at that Gospel, read it from beginning to end, and his honesty runs straight through it. And then there was the agony of his own death on the cross – again, his hard work to restore you and me to a relationship with God that God deeply desires, no matter how far astray we may have wandered. And so we listen to Jesus, and we trust him, and – surprise! – we've been found by him. We discover we've been found by him. How great is the victory, and greater still the joy for both our Lord and for you and me.

Ahh, but there's still the work of living in community. There's no getting around it, no matter how restored we are to God, there are all these other people around us in this community that we need to be able to live with. We need to be able to talk with each other, and not just civilly but with care and concern. We need to be able to build up each other to do God's mission in the world. And that's hard and messy work sometimes.

A United Church of Christ pastor named Todd Weir recounts the first time someone gently admonished him in private, living out the advice of Jesus in handling conflict. Pastor Todd was the driver of a group of people within his denomination who had a particular special ministry. And because he was the driver, he was the clock-watcher, the gate-keeper; he was the one who said, "It's time to get on the road." "It's time to get going." "We've got to keep to our schedule . . . make the next appointment . . . make the next program . . ." Consequently, he admitted to feeling anxious in that role. There was always the sense of urgency in his voice. One day, he snapped at two of the folks in the group he was driving. They were, in his opinion, making them

get behind in their schedule. They were talking, they were sitting, they weren't getting on the van, so he fussed at them to get a move on. They asked for just a few extra minutes to finish their conversation. He told them "No" and told them to "get in the van pronto!"

Well, they got in the van, but they were tense and angry and frustrated. The next day one of the two women who had been fussed at came up to Pastor Todd, privately. She quietly told him that she had been dealing with a major problem the day before, and that other woman was giving her a caring, listening ear. She admitted she felt hurt by Pastor Todd's very abrupt tone. But she said she also fully understood the kinds of pressures he was under, to get them from one place to another. She didn't want her anger to fester, and she spoke honestly from her heart, and expressed hope that they could work this out and that they would be able to communicate more effectively in the future.

Pastor Todd wrote about this event, and this is what he said: "This was done with such great care that it was easy for me to apologize without losing face. It was a revelation to me that both of us might have legitimate perspectives and needs in the situation. It was an even bigger revelation that someone could be angry with me and not hurt back."

Do you see how that woman followed Jesus' advice? Do you see how she tried to make sense of Jesus' advice for conflict? She didn't complain and whine to someone else, which would have been the easy thing to do. Instead, she went to Pastor Todd, and she went alone, and that was the much harder thing to do. Potentially messy. But do you see how Pastor Todd listened? And do you see how their relationship was restored? There is victory and joy in what has been gained.

Our Lord Jesus gives some additional advice beyond this first step; advice to take if the first step does not succeed, which tells us pretty clearly that the first step doesn't always succeed. And I recognize that I'm not dealing with those second and third steps in this sermon, I'm really only dealing with the first step because that first step has to be taken – first. I am not for one moment saying there will always be a happy ending, like Pastor Todd's story. There is no money back guarantee that by taking Jesus' advice in conflict in the church will bring about reconciliation. I'm not even certain what the odds are. Nonetheless, we are called by our Lord Jesus to do this. This is how it is to be the Church, to take this first step. Any why? The answer lies at the very end of our passage, when Jesus says this, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Jesus Christ is with us in this Church. We are his Body, He is the Head. We follow His advice on dealing with conflict among us, not because Trinity is our church, we follow His advice and His ways because Trinity is His church.

Amen.

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