

“A Community of Reconciliation” based on Matthew 18:15-20 and Psalm 119:33-40

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, Sept. 10, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Today’s gospel reading is about living life in a community, but not just any community. It is about living life in the community known as the church. Now, to be clear, the church Jesus speaks of is not a building, like a temple. It’s not a system of ordained pastors filling the role of temple priests, making sure the right religious functions are done on behalf of the people. No, the church is a community of individuals called by God to continue Jesus’s ministry of reconciliation right now, empowered by the Holy Spirit to use our own skills and abilities to play our part in what Jesus began – the new creation.

This morning we baptized Lena Kate and Vivian, bringing them into this community. We baptized them as children because this sacrament is an outward physical sign of the inward grace of Jesus already at work within them by the Holy Spirit. When they are older, in high school as is our tradition at SPC, they will have the opportunity to accept this calling themselves by choosing for themselves to confirm their faith.

In doing so, we made a promise as a congregation, as the church community, to guide and nurture Lena Kate and Vivian by word and deed with love and prayer. The question then is – are you, am I, are any of us really up to that challenge? After all, standing up here talking to you all is a flawed human being. And as I look out among you, and I’m sorry to offend you, but I don’t see a single person who is flawless, or sinless. And yet, I also see a multitude of holy saints, people set apart by God for a particular purpose. Yes, we all fall short of God’s goodness, but each of you is loved by God and nothing can separate you from that love.

The challenge then for us, in guiding and nurturing the young people we baptize, is not to simply avoid sin and leave the church if we fail to hold up our end of the bargain. No, the challenge is accepting that love of God – accepting that we are all loved. Then we are to take that love, as it is poured in our hearts by the Holy Spirit and share it with these young people by how we act. Again, we are flawed, and being in community is hard – but our ministry is reconciliation, it’s coming together, where we stand on a level playing field and make things right with one another, and also make things right with God, thus creating something new.

You are called to receive love, and to share it, and to seek reconciliation always. With these young people, we want to model for them a community in Christ, which means putting on his mind, his way of thinking, his perspective. This means we humble ourselves and look to raise up others around us. This is what we see in Jesus – who being equal to God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. But instead became human, humbling himself, even to the point of death, death on a cross, as Paul wrote in his letter to Philippi.

Think about what this means: God sought justice with a rebellious and sinful world. And rather than destroying us in vengeance for the things we choose to do wrong, the Father chose to see our goodness, the goodness declared at our creation. The Father sent the one and only begotten Son, to be one of us, in our flesh, because God so loved the world, offering each of us God’s life, a life that is abundant, filling every need, and eternal. That is the ultimate in reconciliation – a perfect God changes justice from retaliatory vengeance, into merciful, humble, reconciliation. This is what we must model, as Christ modeled it for us.

Yet, I will acknowledge that today's readings have some challenging lines within them. Taken out of their context, these have been misused for manipulation, whether by manipulating victims of abuse, or teaching us somehow that we can manipulate God. To do this, it requires ripping the words of Jesus out of their context, out of the context of the world in which they were said, and out of the context of the whole of Jesus's message.

I want you to imagine for a moment that you are one of the disciples of Jesus hearing this. You are not a Roman citizen. You are not a religious leader. You are a regular Judean. As a Jew, you know that Roman Citizens can exercise authority over you always. As Jesus will say later on in Matthew's Gospel, "You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over their subjects, and the great ones exercise authority over nations." What's more, as a noncitizen, you have no rights, at least not over against anyone who is a citizen. You are near to the bottom rung of society.

If someone of a higher status takes advantage of you, then you have absolutely no recourse. You have no ability to get a hearing, let alone any kind of restitution. That's the first century world you are living in. Therefore, when Jesus encourages you to tell the truth about your complaint, to bring something to the light on equal terms with the other person, this would have seemed revolutionary – except for one thing, namely that it's in the Old Testament. When Israel and Judah were nations, this is what God expected and why the prophets warned the people to shape up. Now, under the rule of the Roman empire, the leveling created by the law of Moses was lost, because they were not rulers of a nation, but subject to an oppressive power. This reduced the law to personal piety.

But Jesus calls them an "ecclesia" or if he spoke in Aramaic, likely he said some form of the Hebrew word, "qahal." It is largely a political term for the assembly, those literally called out in Greek. In Hebrew, it means those brought together. We translate this church. In Jesus's words, he is presenting a new way to be governed. This is not a political system, but as Messiah, the Christ, the anointed King, he is making clear that the ecclesia will transcend any human boundaries and be a place, where, as the Apostle Paul put it, all are one under King Jesus, because there is no slave or free, gentile or Jew, or man or woman.

So, in any conflict, those involved are equal under Jesus's reign. If you are in the servant class, as the disciples were, you are equal to the free citizen in the eyes of God. Likewise, in the eyes of God, Gentiles are equal, for not by birthright, but by faith, they have come into community of the One True God. The same for women, their value is equal to any man.

John Chrysostom, in the fourth century, a saint in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, wrote that Jesus's words here are primarily to move the offender to fear, so that those whom they hurt might not fail to accuse someone out of weakness. And what's more, it should be encouraged for people to speak out, to tell the truth of the offenses committed against them, because the end result is that you have gained a sibling as an equal who hears you as an equal.

Now in saying this, I know that in some major scandals it has not been used that way. In one of the high-profile scandals at Willow Creek, where Pastor Bill Hybels came under accusation of abuse, the elders twisted this to accuse the victims of not being biblical, saying they didn't come to him in private first, then bring an elder, before bringing it to the church and the press. It has been used to protect leadership, by saying their speaking out was not biblical. But as we heard from that voice from the early church, it is not meant to protect leadership, but level out status for the victim.

The church we want our young people to enter must be good, and by this, I mean one that seeks goodness at all levels. This church is one that seeks to be like Christ, seeking reconciliation, not one that protects an institution or a leader. The reputation of our church must be one of love and equality, seen in word and deed.

The notion of going to the one who sinned against you, was, in the early church, considered an empowerment of the abused, and a humbling of the abuser. In today's culture, thankfully, Christian influence has changed power dynamics in the secular world so that we are all supposed to be equal under law. However, this progress in the legal system makes it harder, in severe cases of harm, to go directly to an abuser, because they know legal action may follow and they become defensive, continuing their behavior. In Rome, the powerful had no fear of the law unless the person they hurt was of equal or higher status. So, for a victim, your only chance for justice was confrontation.

Therefore, we must look at this as a description in its context to apply a prescription for how we act today. This system Jesus laid out is meant to make the two parties equal. If the two cannot gather as equals, bring another or two to be witnesses, and if that cannot still provide an equal field, bring it out into the public. The important thing is that we do not fail to correct one another, because if we do, we let wounds fester, creating resentment, and causing much bigger problems down the line. In relatively minor cases it causes division, or in abuse cases – it continues – and many more are hurt.

You see, Jesus goes on from here to continue to talk about this process, but often these words are separated from the conflict resolution portion of the text, and it is used as if they present us with a magical formula for praying. This is what I was alluding to earlier when I talked of using these texts to try to manipulate God. In most English translations, these are rendered something like this, "If two or three 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 among them."

But do not lose sight of where Jesus is saying this – this is about conflict and reconciliation still. A wooden, literal translation, as we heard today makes this clearer, but it's hard to read. "If two of you might be in harmony on the earth concerning any action, if they shall ask, it will become for them near my Father in heaven." You can see why it is translated the way we traditionally translate it, because that wooden translation is hard to say.

What I want to point out is that the word translated in most translations as "anything," is not the usual word translated this way. It is the word, "*pragmatos*," and perhaps that word sounds familiar. It is the root of our word, "pragmatic." This relates to something done in practice. That is to say, it is not just anything you ask for, it is your resolution, the harmony you have in resolving the conflict.

In her doctoral dissertation, published as the book, "Blessed," Kate Bowler describes how these verses have been misconstrued and misapplied. She wrote of people who gathered around a fellow Christian to "agree," for that Christian who is hoping for a promotion, a car loan, divine healing, or even family unity. She notes that on the last one, if not in agreement, a husband and wife can cancel out each other's prayers, as if God is a math transaction. This is not what this text means, not at all.

Likewise, the idea that gathering in twos or threes somehow makes Jesus more present. That's not what is meant by these verses either. I assure you that when you are on your own praying to Jesus,

he is there with you listening to your prayers. This is not a magical formula to bring Jesus into your midst to show up like it's a seance.

However, when two or three are gathered in Jesus's name, when we are gathered as persons in Christ, mindful of Christ, then we have a tangible sense of Jesus's presence there, not by a miracle, but in the other person and by ourselves for that person. So, it is on us to act toward one another, as if Jesus were sitting in the next chair. Would you say that if Jesus was sitting right there?

Indeed, once again, we must see this short text today in light of much more in Matthew, for Jesus says after describing the power structures of the world and its nations, "It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave. Just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many."

Indeed, just as I quoted Paul earlier in Philippians, we see Jesus telling us to be like him, to humble ourselves and lift others up. This is what the church is and what we want to pass on to our children. So, as we consider our promise to these children, let us push farther out from this text, because it is one thing to handle conflict well, and it is another to avoid conflict altogether.

Let us resolve together to remember the church is all of us at SPC, and what we want to model is not a belief that the church is a building, nor is the church the pastors and staff – No, we all are the church, and we all are called to be like Jesus – humble and loving. To be the church means we can speak out when ready, if we feel we have been hurt, and also, we must listen to the hurt that others confess, confessing our part in it too. We do this so that we might gain each other as siblings, reconciled with God and one another.

This is how we handle conflict, but also, as the church we do not need conflict to grow close, We can choose to grow close by rejoicing with those who rejoice, Mourning with those who mourn, proclaiming the gospel by word and deed. Many in this congregation are hurting – Who can we reach out to? Even if you think, "Oh, I bet they're inundated with phone calls," you can call and they don't have to answer. You can choose not to be offended if they don't pick up. Don't be offended but lead with grace. The same goes for the good news we hear. When we hear something wonderful, we can send a note, send a card. We can call or can stop over. We can do this for those in mourning and those rejoicing. We can share life.

This is what you and I are called to do. You may not want to do it. You don't have to do it. I can't make you. You don't need to. That's all true, but you are indeed called to do it, and should do it. We all should do this. Imagine the connection we would feel to God and one another and the church we would leave for our children, if, when we had issues, we reconciled them, and what's more, imagine if we were pro-active to rejoice and suffer together.

This is how we guide and nurture all the children of our church, and this is how we guide and nurture one another in this church. It's our calling. No, it's not easy. And so, I'll leave you with one final note from our Psalm. In Hebrew, every line starts with the letter "He," like our letter, "H." All are "Hiphil" or causative verbs, meaning each line should say, "Have me," "make me," or "cause me" to do what is right. Go to the Psalm and think of it in those terms. Let your prayer be for God to have you follow through with your calling, and then we can be the church we are called to be – an example for our children, as a community of reconciliation. Amen.