



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

INJ

Sermon by Pr. Dave Olson
on Matthew 16:15-20 (Romans 13:8-14))
on Sunday, September 6, 2020 (14th Sunday of Pentecost)

About six weeks ago, Pastor John asked me if I could cover for him today. I told him I'd be glad to do so. Then when I read the assigned readings, I thought to myself, "Maybe I should reconsider that offer!" Today's Gospel reading is actually a very difficult passage. This passage has been used by the church as 1) a process of conflict resolution, or 2) as a process of excommunication. My own life history in various church bodies has complicated my interpretation of this passage. I'll illustrate this with a brief personal sketch.

As an infant, I was baptized in a Missouri Synod congregation. Shortly thereafter, the pastor of that congregation led a splinter group which included my family, to form a different church. Then when I was in second grade, the splinter congregation split apart again over doctrinal differences. Each faction thought they held the "pure" doctrine on the points of contention. Finally, by the end of my fifth grade year, the splinter congregation to which we belonged was no longer able to support the parochial school, so my parents had had enough of the "in" fighting. We came full circle and returned to the Missouri Synod congregation where I had been baptized. But that was not the end of my journey. About 10 years later during my first year in seminary, the persons in power in Missouri Synod declared six professors at the seminary to be heretics, even though I had heard no heresy from them in class. That served as the beginning of the great split in the Missouri Synod, and it resulted in a change of seminary for me and many of my classmates. At each point of controversy in my church life, passages such as this one had served as a basis to justify divisions in the body of Christ.

With that personal background, what are we to make of this passage? In Judaism, the rabbi functioned as a teacher. Not all of the laws in Judaism were meant to apply all the time. A rabbi could determine if a law was binding in a given situation, or whether it

could be loosed. For example, if a couple wanted to be married on a normal day of fasting, the rabbi could loose that law for the wedding celebration.

Now in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus was often pictured in this role as a rabbi who could bind or loose a law. However, Jesus was noted to be different from normal rabbis in that he taught with authority. Throughout most of this gospel, Matthew implies this authority came from heaven. Then in the closing verses of the last chapter, he said this explicitly, before Jesus gave the great commission to his disciples. After Easter, Jesus' authority to bind and loose the law was given to the Church. Now Jesus continues to exercise his authority through the Church.

This brings us to the process of the Church exercising that authority as outlined in today's reading. Notice how this process is meant to be a direct communication with the person who has sinned. It is not indirect gossiping about that person in a coffee clutch. The aim of these steps is to catch and hold the brother/sister who seems to be falling away from the congregation. Only as a last resort is the person to be put out of the group and treated as one who still could be brought back, just as other outsiders who are evangelized. This final step is what seems so offensive to our modern listeners in an age where many desire more tolerance.

Here is where it becomes important to look at the broader context of this passage. In the verses just prior to our text, Jesus illustrated the story of a shepherd who had 100 sheep and one of them went astray. Then the shepherd left the 99 to search for the lost one. When he finds the stray, he rejoices more over that one than the 99. Again, immediately after our text, Peter asked if he should forgive his brother seven times for an offense. To which Jesus responded not seven times, but seventy times seven. Clearly this passage is framed in a context of grace and forgiveness.

Before the church can declare forgiveness, the issue often becomes deciding what is a "sin". What if a person refuses to repent and says "I don't think this is a sin!". Various church bodies have had to address this kind of situation in recent decades as they wrestled with a variety of social issues like women's reproductive rights and more recently about sexual orientation. (Mark Alan Powell). For Matthew, "sin" would be going against the teaching of the Church. He would say this is where the Church needs to exercise its teaching function of "binding or loosing" even if that meant losing some

members. He couldn't have conceived of our modern situation in which different church bodies are answering these social questions with differing consensus.

To complicate matters even more, what happens when a church body can't decide whether something is a "sin" or not. This actually happened in the early years of the ELCA on the issue of abortion. A variety of opinions existed within our church body, so it was decided that tolerance of various Christian views on this subject was permitted. In a situation like this, intolerance of other views on this given topic becomes the "sin".

Another thing to be considered in matters of church discipline is the motivation of the person bringing the offense. Is the offended one driven by a desire to be right, or is the offended one trying to exercise power over another person? These are selfish motives. They are forms of pride. It may be difficult to assess another person's motives, but this may be more evident over time. If you are the person bringing the charge, it is important to be honest with yourself and to assess what is your motivation. If it is a form of pride, you may want to reconsider whether to bring the charge.

On the other hand, you may determine you are raising the issue purely out of love and concern for the other person. Like the shepherd you may be seeking to find the sheep who has strayed away. That is the love that "does no wrong to a neighbor" as Paul reminds us in Romans 13 which we heard earlier today.

Given all of these considerations, while this passage appears to be straight forward on the surface, many flashing yellow warning lights appear when we dig a little deeper. We need to proceed with caution. Perhaps, a quick flashback to the Sermon on the Mount can give us a bit of guidance. There Jesus asked this question. "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" Matt 7:3. For many of us, it is easier to see the ways we have been wronged than to see how our actions have harmed others. This question of Jesus warns us to approach the process outlined here with humility.

If we approach this process with a renewed humble mindset, we can go back to the parable of the stray sheep and ask ourselves some key questions. If we are part of the 99, did we somehow block access to food or shelter, so that the most vulnerable sheep couldn't thrive? As a result of our greedy use of resources, was this weakest sheep forced out of the flock? If we are honest, we may need to admit this possibility exists.

In answering these questions, we need to remember that Jesus sided with the vulnerable stray.

What does this process as outlined in Matthew look like? It requires open and clear communication from both parties in the dispute. To reach this goal, good listening skills need to be practiced at each step. Each side deserves to be heard from their own perspective, so a shared understanding can be reached. We need to hear out the other, rather than immediately thinking how we might rebut what the other person is saying. If we truly listen, we might have to say, "I never thought of it like that before." These good listening skills coupled with a humble Christlike mindset on both sides can lead to positive resolution in many situations

I would like to illustrate the power of healing when active listening is employed. This example is taken from our Befrienders training. It goes like this.

One day a teacher had a 16-year-old student become disruptive in class. He shouted angry threats at her. She could have called authorities to protect herself from this verbal abuse. Instead, she sat down and asked the student to talk to her. It took some time for him to quiet down because he was very agitated. Finally, he stopped pacing. Then he sat down and began talking about his life. She just listened. No one had listened to him like that for a long time. Her attentive silence gave him a chance to see and hear himself. She didn't offer any advice. She couldn't figure out his life for him, and she didn't have to. He could do that himself once she had listened.

This story illustrates the final verse of our text. "For when two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." It describes the holiness of these moments of real attentive listening. It has been said, "you can't hate someone who's story you know ". You may not like their story or even that person. But active listening creates a relationship. With active listening, we move closer to one another. We all would do well to do less judging and instead do more listening especially when a disagreement arises. This may open us up to the power of Christ's love working among us. Amen!