

It is Everyone's Business
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

¹⁵"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. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."
Matthew 18:15-20 (NRSV)

Introduction and Comments:

Worried because they hadn't heard anything from the elderly lady in the neighboring apartment for day, Mrs. Silver said to her son, "Timmy, would you go next door and see how old Mrs. Kirkland is?"

A few minutes later, Timmy returned.

"Well," asked Mrs. Silver, "is she all right?"

"She's fine, except that she's angry at you."

"At me?" the woman exclaimed. "Whatever for?"

"She said 'It's none of your business how old she is,'" snickered Timmy.

Sermon:

Given the dwindling influences of Christianity in our western world, I think a close look at our text today points to some of the reasons for this decline and its solutions. Within the varieties of Western Christianity, cultural differences often take on the weight of right or wrong. We have many Western Christians, especially if they happened to be in the majority, who see themselves as the more spiritually sophisticated; therefore, more entitled to dictate the standards of faith and practice and to critically critique other people's faith expressions. Some see themselves as more biblically true than others, at least to the western English translations of scripture, and thus, contemptuous of those not like them. It seems that being right according to culture is often more important for some than being in Christ - we don't seem to learn, do we?

Therefore, let's look at Matthew's knitting together the teachings of Jesus in ways that gave practical guidance for his Ancient Near East Jesus-community and for ours today.

Matthew's church was comprised primarily of Jewish Jesus-believers, who were heavily influenced by Hellenistic worldviews and those who were struggling to combat such views. Therefore, some of these Jesus-believing Jews would have been of what we would call the more conservative Jerusalem bent. And, then there were non-Jewish, Hellene believers, God-venerators, associated with the synagogues and the Jesus groups.

The people in Matthew's church would have been at various stages in their understandings about who and what Jesus was as they tried to work out their faith and social relationships as a surrogate family. Some in Matthew's community of faith may have been expelled from their

local synagogue because of their belief in Jesus; others may have left voluntarily; while others were straddling the fence, participating in both faith communities. Therefore, hear our passages of scriptures this morning as people at different stages of faith getting cross-wise of each other as well as with the local synagogue about the who, the what, and the why of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

In the opening verses of chapter 18, one of Jesus' disciples asked him who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God; that is, which one of them would hold the highest status in the kingdom when it came on earth and concomitantly what was the criteria for such a position. Jesus tells his disciples that those people who become as little children; that is, become as humble and non-assuming as a child or as a low-born person, who are willing to become servants to all of God's people, regardless of their social status, these will be the greatest in the kingdom.

I remind us that in the ANE, a person would not readily abdicate their honor status or take upon themselves an exalted honorific status beyond their birth family's merit. One may do good deeds for the greater good and acquire more honor than their birth family's status had given them, but that was given to them by the group or community, not assumed by the individual.

Matthew, in recalling teachings of Jesus, sets forth a new-model for relationships in the life of the community of faith by saying that the "little ones," the unlearned and unsophisticated, or the peasants, who possessed little social status, are not to be treated with disdain or minimized in this new faith community. They are to be protected, nurtured, and cared for as little brothers and sisters in the family of God, and they in kind are to respect and honor the more mature in the faith as older siblings. I will mention again that in the Ancient and Modern Mediterranean world, the strongest units of loyalty with emotional ties in a family exists between mothers and sons, brothers and sisters, not husbands and wives. So, this relationship of brothers and sisters in Christ is one of paramount importance. Also, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had turned much of the honor-shame conventions on their ear, when he declared that the poor, the peasants, are blessed, an honorific term meaning that they now have the highest of ascribed honor as members of his holy family.

Therefore, those who dishonor or shame their brothers and sisters are committing a grave offense against not only them but against God, the Father of them all. To act contemptuously and disdainfully of the spiritually immature or unsophisticated and thereby cause them to stumble; that is, to assume a wrong or a defensive faith posture or to fall away from the faith is a very grievous offense that God will not take lightly, especially if the offense occurs while the offender seeks power and status within the Christ community.

So, our text this morning also concerns a community of believers that are in the processes of sorting out not only what it means to be a Jew and a Jewish believer in Jesus, considering the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and its implications, but also how traditional social conventions play a part in their egalitarian community of faith.

Within the dynamics of this sorting out, we hear again in verses 19-20, the language of loosening and binding that we heard in Matthew 16. Loosening and binding are technical rabbinical terms associated with right teachings and right interpretations or wrong teachings or wrong interpretations of scripture. When the rabbis or sages gave an interpretation of Torah or countermanded or loosened a teaching or interpretation, it was considered binding not only on this earth but also in heaven because the inspiration for the interpretation was believed to have been aided by or given by the holy.

Jesus' question about who do people say he is and who do his disciples say he is resulted in Peter saying, that Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed Son of the Living God. Jesus says to Peter that his inspired understandings came from God and will be the bedrock of a new

community of faith. Furthermore, Peter's understandings are the final authority, inspired by God upon earth, regarding who and what Jesus was and is for all time.

In Matthew's church, during the sorting out and clarifying processes about Jesus, tempers may have flared, people may have said hurtful things to one another and behaved dishonorably toward the newer and/or lower social status members or the non-Jews. Those of lower or inferior social ranking may have presumed upon the status of the more prominent members and offended them.

I think it is important for us to understand that what is going on in Matthew's community of faith has little to do with sin as acts of immorality per se, but with people offending and violating the protocols of honor and respect in relationship to one another as family. I say this because Matthew's Jesus-group is made up of people who have cut their teeth on the Ten Commandments and the Jewish moral and ethical codes, along with a considerable number of non-Jewish God-venerators who had embraced the radical monotheism of Judaism in part because of its high moral and ethical codes, but refused to submit to circumcision, Jewish dietary laws, or keep some feast days.

However, as we all know in any group of people, personal offenses will occur, but this is especially the case for Matthew's community given that much of Jesus' teachings and his egalitarianism were radically new. Therefore, Matthew in keeping with ancient Jewish traditions concerning dissenting and hostile parties at an impasse, gave his community practical and sage advice, which was bring in a mature third party or parties to hear the case and to act as unbiased arbitrators. (Lev. 19:17-18; Det. 19:15)

In this process, if all parties came to the table of arbitration in good faith, they could save face and protect the integrity of the faith community. However, if the offender or offended remained unyielding, causing a serious breach in the family life of the community, the recalcitrant person or persons should be excommunicated, kicked out of the group and treated as outsiders.

Matthew understood that these personal offenses and disharmony could threaten the very survival of his Jesus-group. In fact, it is believed that it was unresolved disagreements in the early Jesus community in Jerusalem that precipitated the Apostle Paul's taking up a collection for a faltering Mother Church.

Matthew says that when people become members of the surrogate family of Christ they are not to be treated rudely and dishonorably, individually or collectively, regardless of their social status as reckoned by the greater culture. Those who treat others disdainfully are themselves not very mature in Christ because they have refused to internalize the Gospel to that point where they are willing to serve the needs and interests of their brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, regardless of their socio-economic status or religious maturity.

Therefore, today let us see Christ's Church as a global family, where people are to nurture and care for one another as brothers and sisters in love, grace, and wisdom, all the while respecting and honoring their differences, except wherein those differences contradict Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, Son of the Living God.

In these passages, Matthew is telling his faith-community that what Jesus told Peter in chapter 16:9 about his authority to bind and loosen is extended to the faith-community - the Church. Whenever believers in Jesus as the Church gather in the Spirit of the Christ, truly seeking guidance and answers to problems and interpretations of Jesus' teachings, the Christ presence will be there and will help all parties involved arrive at a good and holy solution, if everyone comes in good faith.

However, caring for and helping the brothers and sisters in Christ in Matthew's time and in ours may set one on the path of violating the laws of the land. And, if people choose to do so,

the consequences they may suffer should be counted as just part of their costs of serving. Therefore, two old adages are appropriate: if you can't stand the heat, don't get in the kitchen, and look before you leap. I believe we can help others by working within the system, even if it means we must work to change the system.

But, let me say that the heart of the matter, the absolute truth, relative to all times and to all peoples, is that in the body of Christ, we are to love our brothers and sisters as we love our selves and only as a last resort do we ever entertain the idea of censure or excommunication and severe relationships with them either as individuals or as groups.

However, if and when a recalcitrant person or a group, a sect, sees the error of their ways and repents; that is, turns around, seeking a renewed fellowship, they must be taken back into the fold with open and loving arms. This having been said, people are expected to learn from their errors and from the gracious ways they were treated during their foray into error or offense. Furthermore, we must understand that a person's or a group's history of bad or inappropriate behaviors may dictate the limits to which they are allowed re-involvement in matters of the church and in our lives. For example: the sober alcoholic, church treasurer, who falls off the wagon and empties the church's bank account in a drunken binge, should not be allowed to continue as church treasurer. He or she, if repentant, are to be forgiven and encouraged to make amends. So, given their penchant for merry making, maybe they could be the chairperson of the hospitality committee.

People's behaviors affect the integrity of the body of Christ and impede or enhance its effectiveness. Jesus teaches us to forgive and to be forgiven, but also to go and sin or offend no more. Furthermore, Jesus never backs down from a confrontation with the religious-political leadership of his day, the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, or his own disciples, who tried to undermine the Gospel and its effectiveness, nor should we as Jesus' disciples.

As Matthew saw it, something is amiss when God's people treat one another dishonorably either because of religious immaturity, socio-economic status, religious sectarianism, or so-called religious nationalism. Furthermore, something is radically, radically wrong when Christians tolerate offensive and disruptive behaviors in the local or greater Christian community under the guise of so-called graciousness, or worse yet, adopt the attitude of "it's none of my business" what others in the church do, locally, nationally, or internationally so long as I get my salvation fix every week or so. I am thoroughly convinced that we will be held accountable for all that we didn't do that we knew we should do and what we did.

As Matthew shows, the health of the Church of Jesus Christ and its survival is a serious matter and is every Christian's business. Remaining silent to the abuses of institutional power and the breaches of the moral and spiritual tenants of the Gospel is to condone them. And, the personal and institutional attitudes of go along to get along is diluting the Gospel and its ability to bring God's rule on earth. That being the case, the church cannot long survive as an effective manifestation of God's presence if Christians do not take up their crosses, assume all of their divine responsibilities as the Spirit gives leadership, and follow Jesus even to Golgotha. (Matt. 16:24-26)

Bibliography

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