

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 18, Year A
September 7, 2008
The Reverend Brett Backus, Deacon

“Christian Forgiveness: The Progression of the Heavenly Kingdom”

Matthew 18:15-20

“Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Today's Gospel, believe it or not, is about forgiveness. It is about the way in which we Christians treat each other, forgive each other, and bring one another back into the gentle embrace of Jesus in times of need. Today's Gospel is about the power of Christian forgiveness and reconciliation and its crucial role in forming Heaven on earth.

Now it may seem a bit strange that you hear me say that today's Gospel is about forgiveness, because it certainly does not seem to be on the surface. Actually, if you are like me, then you usually kind of cringe at hearing the first part of this Gospel, the part about church discipline, and then you relax when you hear the second part, the part about Jesus being among us. Personally, I think that I have this negative reaction because I associate this scripture with Christian judgement and rejection. I associate it with pain inflicted upon other Christians by fellow Christians. However, it seems to me that this treatment of today's Gospel as two separate messages creates our main obstacle in truly understanding this passage. To truly see the point of today's Gospel, to hear the message about Christian forgiveness, we must first treat this Gospel as one complete unit. Actually, it may even be helpful to look back to the section that immediately proceeds today's reading.

You see, in Matthew, today's Gospel reading is a complete unit that seems to really begin with the previous passage concerning the one lost sheep. In that passage, Jesus compares God to a shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep behind in order to look for the one who wandered off. I think that this passage sort of sets the tone for today's Gospel message. It sets a tone of compassion, forgiveness, restoration, love, and placing the individual before the group. So keeping this tone in mind as we look to our Gospel lesson for today, we can see that it is not so much focused on what to do or how to reject or chastise a member of the church body when one has been living in a questionable manner. Rather, today's Gospel is more focused on how to bring such a person or group of people back into the family and body of Christ.

There are a few important points in today's Gospel that support this idea. First, the

Gospel today says to take these “disciplinary” actions when another member of the church sins against you. It does not say to do so whenever a particular individual sins. Though this point seems simple, it is important because it eliminates the arrogance and judgment normally associated with this passage.....without the difference in that one word, we might think Jesus is saying that it is us and not Christ who was charged with judging all sin. The common understanding of today's Gospel normally resulted in individuals being thrown out of the church or placed under discipline if it were discovered that they were living sinfully.....this produces an attitude that no one else sins on a regular basis. This distinction helps us to see that today's Gospel is speaking more along the lines of how to handle interpersonal conflict as Christians, and not judgement of ultimate spiritual or theological conflict or problems.

Second, to treat one as a Gentile and a tax collector is not to exclude one from the church body. On the face, this verse seems to imply that one who refuses to listen to the church's counsel is to be treated as an outsider. So, how can such a statement be part of a Gospel message of forgiveness and restoration? Remember, the person that this Gospel is attributed to, Matthew, was himself a tax collector. Also, did Jesus himself not eat with and actively seek out such members of his society? What I am getting at here is the suggestion that perhaps to treat one as a Gentile and a tax collector is not to exclude them and cast them out of the church. Rather, that to treat one as such is to actually pursue them even greater as the caring shepherd pursues the wandering sheep, and how in reality God infinitely pursues us.

When the first part of today's Gospel is understood in this way, I would like to suggest that the second part becomes a charge for Christian love and forgiveness instead of a transfer of power and authority. When today's Gospel reading is understood as a message of church discipline and exclusion as a result of sinful behavior, then the second part of today's message would seem to be Jesus passing on to all believers the authority and power to judge others. This is needless to say problematic in that not all believers or followers of Christ are always in agreement.....actually hardly ever. So the inevitable question becomes, if we all have the power to bind or loose earthly and heavenly things when we are gathered in prayer and of the same accord in the name of Christ, who is correct when two groups of believers clash against one another?

For this reason I am suggesting a different understanding of today's message. You see, Jesus is not teaching us today about how to exclude and discipline each other as Christians.....how to decide who is in and who is out. That's His job, and we should leave it to Him. He is pushing us to forgive and reconcile with one another as a means of making the Kingdom of Heaven and His second coming a reality. Christ is charging us with a great responsibility and power in today's Gospel, but it is not the power or authority to

judge and punish others. He is charging us with the power and authority to love, forgive, reconcile, and in turn widen the eternal embrace of His heavenly kingdom. He does this by showing us that what we do or forgive here and now is also done and forgiven in heaven. That is to be our motivation. Of course presently and historically this is not something that we as Episcopalians or as the general Body of Christ do well, and it is something that we should consider and take seriously. Our forgiveness and reconciliation promote the progression of God's Heavenly Kingdom.

I kind of see today's Gospel lesson as an extension of what we are taught in the Lord's prayer. God forgives our sins as.....or if we forgive those that others have committed against us. So, when there is a problem between two parts of the community of Christ, we must try to solve this problem among ourselves first. However, when such an approach does not work, today's Gospel teaches us to pursue even more those whom with we are in conflict in the spirit of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. We are taught to pursue them just as the shepherd pursues his one wandering sheep, just as Christ pursued the tax collectors, and just as God infinitely pursues us. Only in living out such extreme love and forgiveness will His kingdom come, and His will be done on earth and in heaven. For we are taught today, that truly what we do here is indeed done in heaven also and we are truly charged with ushering in God's Heavenly Kingdom.

When we really think about it, each of us only has come into the Kingdom of Christ because He first came to us and reconciled us to Him through His love and forgiveness, both at the cross and in our own personal lives.....and weekly here at this altar rail. So, is it not obvious then the way in which we as followers of Christ are to treat one another as fellow Christians and even more importantly those considered to be outside of the flock? We love Christ only because He first loved us. And it is precisely that attitude that Christ is telling us we should have as we deal with our own conflicts in the church today. To bring in through love, not to push out with judgment. That is how change will take place.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I hopefully leave you today with a new understanding of today's Gospel reading, the way we are to reconcile with, not separate ourselves from, one another and all creation, and in particular a new understanding of the following verse: "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Amen.