

**Text: Matthew 18.15-20**

I've mentioned before that I've been a part of Christian bodies that tend to use Matthew 18 as a threat... Meaning, it wasn't uncommon to hear someone say things like: “If you don't straighten up and fly right I'm going to go all Matthew 18 on you!” Which meant they'd pull out the big guns, they'd come at you on their own once to try to get you to change your evil ways, and then they'd get a couple friends—who we'd picture as the muscle, the goons—and they'd all come at you at once to pressure you into repenting. And if that didn't work they'd expose your sins to the whole church body—and imagine the shame involved there—and if you still refused to confess your sins they'd shun you... cast you out of the church.

I get that Matthew 18 is about discipline—and I know there are times in any body when discipline is necessary: setting boundaries, securing the health and the integrity of the body... I get that. And I think it's telling that Jesus recognized that those who followed him would not be immune from conflict after he'd ascended to the Father. And here, in Matthew 18, he lays out a pattern for how we might deal with this kind of discipline when the need comes up.

But I think something odd happens when people pluck verses 15-20 out of their context in order to use them as a discipline policy. I think we lose the overarching sense—the underlying rationale—that should guide all of our thoughts and hopes as we enter into these kinds of discussions.

You see, what we didn't read in Matthew 18 this morning was the beginning of the chapter where Jesus talks about how precious the little ones are and how important it is that we care for them with real diligence and compassion. And “little ones” might mean children, but it is often also used for any who are weak and vulnerable and marginalized. Jesus is talking about compassion. And the next thing we read in Matthew 18—the thing that comes immediately before our lesson today—is the story about the shepherd who cares so much about the one lost sheep that he'll risk everything to go out and search for it until he finds it and restores it to the flock... Again: it's about compassion and unity.

And the thing that comes immediately after our reading today—the text we'll hear next Sunday—is Peter asking how often we ought to forgive those who offend us. And Peter offers what he must have thought was an overwhelmingly generous number of times to forgive another... he suggests we might forgive our neighbor up to seven times. And that must have drawn groans and audible croaking noises from those listening in, because forgiving someone seven times was tantamount to throwing out the rules altogether—capitulating to the abusers of the law. And imagine Jesus considering this, and imagine the silence in the room as they await his response to Peter... And then Jesus says, “No, not seven times.” And the people gathered there must have heaved a collective sigh of relief... until he went on to say, “not seven times, but seventy seven times.” Imagine that; how can that be possible, who would stoop to that, who would allow themselves to be treated as such a doormat, who would allow the laws of God and humanity to be abused in such a fashion? Why would Jesus even suggest such a thing?

Well, my guess is that he'd suggest it because the thing that always comes first to him is this incredible compassion for others. I think that what he understands is just how important it is for us to maintain our relationships, and he understands that forgiveness is the salve that promotes healing. Without forgiveness we are far too likely to cut the cords of our relationship, to go off in a huff to our separate corners and allow our hurt feelings and anger to fester; and to spread our anger and animosity with others... to divide the body by creating teams that support us and despise this other... or visa versa. And that's just the opposite of what Jesus wants.

And that's why I think using Matthew 18 as a threat—using it as a hammer, as a weapon—to force others into submission to our views is such a misuse of this text. I think that

when we read it in the light of the overall message of this chapter—and Jesus’ life and teachings—we have to search it out how it draws us, not away from, but into the unity, harmony and wholeness of the body.

Really, I think this portion of Matthew 18 is about offering us ways to avoid our more harmful instincts—to avoid threats and pride, and using whatever power we might think we have to force others to think our way, meet our expectations, model themselves after our assumed righteousness. Look at the first thing that’s suggested here, we go to the other alone. And two things pop out at me. First off: if there’s really something bothering us about the behavior of a brother or sister, we are to care enough to confront them. We don’t just look away as they run off in directions that are bound to hurt them and others... that’s not compassion. If we really care about them, we say something to them. And we do it in the most compassionate way we can. We do it alone, we don’t sacrifice their reputation by making this public, we don’t spread rumors about them, we go to the source. Maybe we say something like, “You know I really love you, but there’s something that’s been bothering me... Please forgive me if I’ve got it all wrong, but I’ve noticed something that has me concerned.” And then we express our concern, and if the other senses that we’re honestly coming to them out of concern for them rather than just being judgmental of them, they might unburden themselves.

And you know what; we might realize that we’d been seeing things wrong all along. We might see the logic and the love and the needs that have driven their behavior. And our unity might be restored—which is the goal. Remember the goal isn’t to force someone else to see things our way, it’s to restore peace and wholeness and unity.

But if we aren’t at ease after we speak alone with the other, well, maybe we to go back with one or two others. And this is not about ganging up on the one we’re worried about—I don’t think this is about bringing a couple more mouths to the table to argue our case against this other—the real beauty of this is that it brings a few more eyes and a few more ears to that table. It offers the possibility that these folks might catch the things we’ve missed. Maybe one of them will be able to clear it up for us and show us that we needn’t be worried about this other... And we really ought to be relieved to find that the mistake was ours rather than theirs... And if we’re not ready to be relieved to find that it was our mistake rather than theirs we probably ought to do some real soul searching about our motives in the first place.

And then—if necessary—it goes to a larger body... and here we find the church doing what it always ought to do—not use its numbers to coerce others into compliance—but to be open to the Spirit opening us, molding us, teaching us, moving our hardened hearts, and remaking us in the image of our compassionate God. And we keep in mind that every step along the way is about being restored to unity.

But if at that point we’re still in desperate conflict, we’re told that we should see this person as a gentile or a tax collector. And I know we tend to think this means we’re to ignore them, cast them out of our body, and shun them... but then we recall that Jesus was constantly in trouble for spending time with just these kinds of people. These were the lost little ones he came to restore to the fold. These were precisely the ones he came to live and die for. So in the end, those that we may see as gentiles and tax collectors are still those we pray for, long for, strive to protect and care for.

And all of this is—I think—a very different way of looking at Matthew 18, at least from some of the abuses of it that I’ve seen in my life. And I really don’t think it’s so much about following this pattern precisely, I think it’s more about catching the love that undergirds it, and caring for the other with the kind of love Jesus lived and modeled, and gave to us.

May we be a people who care enough to love one another in meaningful ways that place the goals of unity over division, love over hatred, and peace over pride. Amen