

ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

NEW YORK CITY

MAKING PEACE

Matthew 18:15-20

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 7, 2008

When Peter made his great confession: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), the Lord responded and for the first time spoke of the Church which He was going to build. (Matthew 16:18). In our Gospel lesson for today He gives instruction concerning discipline and godly order or conduct of the Christian. Sin and the spirit of un-repentance and un-forgiveness is a terrible barrier, not only to our fellowship with God, but also to the fellowship among our brothers and sisters. In these verses, Christ has given to His disciples challenging directions as to what course one is to pursue in dealing with a fellow-Christian who has sinned.

Here Jesus, as in the Sermon on the Mount, the instructions are addressed to the victim: "If another member of the church sins against you." The offended are to take the initiative. When a personal offense comes, we are to endeavor to make peace with our brother or sister that has offended us. The offender is to seek the offender. There is no room in the teaching of Jesus or in the conduct of the Christian life for setting around, licking wounds, and sighing, "Poor me." We cannot always avoid being a victim, but we can avoid the victim mentality.

The remarkable thing about Jesus' teaching here is that although He had been stressing humility and would teach forgiveness, he did not say that sin should just be overlooked. Offenses must be dealt with. His explanation of how they must be dealt with is the classic text for how Christians are to handle discipline problems in the church. In our Gospel passage is presented to everyone a whole scheme of action for the mending of broken relationships with the faith community.

When Someone Wrongs Us: If we feel that someone has wronged us, we should immediately put a plan, (well thought out), into action for restoring the relationship. The supreme objective (goal) of Christ teaching is that the wrongdoer may be won back to the faith. The forgiveness of our sins should bring about a deep humility within us and without hesitation to forgive those

who do us wrong. “A gentle tongue can break a bone” (Proverbs 25:15). Our motive should always be to restore, not punish or to be critical. It will be fatal for you and your Christianity, if you allow yourself to mediate the wrong done to you with morbid persistence. Once this wrong is brought out into the open, faced, and stated, and it more than likely you will find it is unimportant and trivial.

Have Someone to Witness What You Say: “But if he will not hear, take with one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established” (Matthew 18:16). If your private and confidential meeting does not produce the desired success of reconciliation, take a brother or sister with you as a witness. “One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established” (Deuteronomy 19:15). This is what Matthew had in mind. However, in this case the taking of the witnesses is not meant to be a way of proving to a man that he has committed an offence. It is to help the process of reconciliation. Often a man hates those whom he has injured and perhaps there is nothing can be said that will win him back to the faith. But a totally new atmosphere can be created by some wise and kindly and gracious brothers and sisters; at least it would give a chance to see ourselves as others see us. The old Rabbis had a wise saying, “Judge not alone, for none may judge alone save One (that is God.)”

Taking Our Personal Troubles to Before the Church: “And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” (Matthew 18:17). The entire procedure is designed to prevent this exclusion from the church. Few cases would ever proceed beyond the first and second provisions. Even when a case demanded the ultimate drastic action of exercising the ban, the intent was redemptive. The disbarment from fellowship would hopefully awaken the rebellious person. On the other hand, the reputation of God’s people would be protected in no disposition for repentance was forthcoming in the erring brother or sister.

Many a church would escape serious trouble and division if the method here outlined by Christ were followed. Under the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus, the local church is the final court of appeal. The teaching of Jesus regarding expulsion from the church is also clearly set forth by Paul in I Corinthians 5:3-5. For the righteous performance of this duty, Christ gave to the

disciples as a body of believers the promise of inspiration. The Greek original reads, "Whatsoever thou shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven and whatsoever thou shall loose on earth shall have been loosed heaven." The Church is to carry out on earth the decisions already made in heaven. You can see what a deep and heavy responsibility this places on the church to discern and to carry out the mind of God. When given to the will of God, the Church acts with the full sanction of heaven in dealing with an unrepentant brothers and sisters. Just as a group of believers maintain a vital relation with Christ, just so fully will it carry out in a specific instance the principles of Christ.

The Difficulty in Making an Apology: One person may find it difficult to apologize. Someone else may find that person's apology unacceptable, insincere, or incomplete. The result is that the first person thinks the apology he gave was not appreciated, while the second person denies that he apologized in any meaningful way. The challenge is in knowing how to express an apology in a way that is sincerely given and thankfully received. This is where it is helpful to know the languages of apology.

1. Expressing regret; saying "I am sorry."
2. Accepting responsibility: saying, "I was wrong."
3. Making restitution: saying, "What can I do o make it right?"
4. Genuinely repenting: "I'll try not to do it again."
5. Requesting forgiveness: asking, "Will you please forgive me?"

A person offering an apology may use one of these languages while the offended party wants to hear another. For example, one may say, "I am sorry," but the other person wants to know what restitution will be made. In another case, the guilty person says, "I was wrong." But the question remains whether it will happen again. In other words, the two are not speaking the same language. This kind of miscommunication happens every day between husbands and wives, parents and children, coworkers, friends.

"Where Two or Three Are:" The power of His presence; "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Because we are human beings with all the frailties of that condition, there are inevitable conflicts among us. Many a church has been torn apart by people who thought they wee right. This passage implies that we are never right if we do not deal with disagreements with love.

Jesus goes on to say that where two or three are gathered in His name, He is there in the midst of them. The Jews themselves had a saying; "Where two sit and are occupied with the study of the Law, the glory of God is among them." We take the idea into the sphere of the Church. Jesus is just as much present in the little congregation as in the great massed congregations. He is just as much present at the Prayer Meeting or the Bible Study Group with their handful of people as in the crowded arena. Jesus is not the slave of numbers. He is there wherever faithful hearts meet, however few they may be, for he gives all of himself to each individual person.

We may take it into the sphere of the home. One of the earliest interpretations of this saying of Jesus was that the two or three are father, mother, and child, and that it means that Jesus is there, the unseen guest in every home. There are those who never give of their best except on the so-called great occasion; but for Jesus Christ every occasion where even two or three are gathered in His name is a great occasion.

PRAYER: Grant me integrity to hear those criticisms which I deserve, the honorable willingness to tell others what they need to hear, the kindness to do so without intent to hurt, and the wisdom to know what is deserved and what is not. In Christ's name. Amen.