

Coop's Scoops # 96 Sunday Sermon, September 6th,
2020



Jesus said: Let him among you without sin cast the first stone at her. (John 8: 7)

Sentence: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and he has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19)

Collect:

Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people, that richly bearing the fruit of good works, we may by you be richly rewarded, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Readings:

Exodus 19:16-24

Psalm 115: 1-11

Romans 13: 1-10

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 18: 15-20

“If another member of the church^[a] sins against you, ^[b] go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.^[c] ¹⁶ But 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. ¹⁷ If 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. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, 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. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”



Sermon: Caution: this is a long one....cup of tea or glass of wine and comfy chair required. Proceed at your own risk!)

When this reading comes up in the Lectionary every three years, I struggle. Sometimes I avoid it by deciding to preach on the Old Testament reading, but that is sheer cowardice. It sure isn't my favourite thing to preach about! It reminds me of all the stories I heard from folk who've been tossed out of churches. It reminds me of when I...Yes, me!!...got tossed out of a church for my sin. It drags up lots of emotions about how easily we tend to divide people into "good" and "bad", "nice" or "nasty", powerful or ignorable....And it doesn't sound much like Jesus to me. The reference to the "church" shows clearly that this Scripture is written post Resurrection when the early church was struggling with false teachers, sexual immorality, and big divisions. There was no "church" ("ecclesia") when Jesus is recorded by Matthew as saying these words. Scholars suggest Jesus may have been referring to the "brothers"....the disciples...and gave guidance related to the recent dispute amongst them about who "would be the greatest". Whatever the case may be, these words are Scripture and therefore God-breathed and as Timothy says are able to instruct us, rebuke us, convict us, and build us up in holy living. And so, in fear and trembling, I will preach on them today.

One can read this Scripture in at least two ways: One, as a common sense step by step set of rules for managing conflict or Two, as a resource for building and maintaining community in the midst of rabble rousers, folks bound by jealousy or anger, people wounded and striking back and so on. We have to remember that "they" are sometimes "us". And we are to treat others as we would like others to treat us...it's a command. So staying together when we are tempted to "unfriend" somebody else, or more traumatically toss them out of the church is very complicated. There **are** conflicts amongst Christians. Duh. (sorry). However, no conflict ever killed a church: failing to deal with conflict is the lethal thing that does kill many a church.

Now I bet some of you are holding your breath while I babble on, waiting for me to get to how I came to be tossed out of a church. You can breathe again, here's the story. It happened in a small northern railroad community which was being evangelized by a Baptist Church Mission. Folks in Texas had sent a pastor up to bring the Gospel to the heathen. My family all attended the church during the late seventies. Every Sunday, off we went...my husband, my three children

and me. I played the piano for them. Got to like many of them immensely. Found one friend in particular named Joanne. One morning, after I'd played the opening hymn "There shall be Showers of Blessing", the Pastor called me to come forward with my family. I thought "Oh isn't this nice, he's going to thank me for playing". Instead, he pointed a gnarly finger at me and shouted "Will you repent of the sin of praying with the people of the United and Anglican churches?" I was dumbstruck. I'd gone to a neighbourhood Bible Study with women from those churches, and enjoyed it immensely. "Be ye not unequally yoked together...Come ye out from among them and be ye separate", he thundered. "Do you repent?" And I managed a pretty firm "NO". Whereupon he roared "Depart from hence." And off my little family went. Kelly was three. We were shunned after that. My friend Joanne was required to cross the street if she saw me. My children's friends were ordered not to play with them. It was truly awful. My husband never fully recovered from this. God, in His constant faithfulness, led us on into the Anglican Church. And the rest is history!

That pastor was not an evil man...he thought he was following Matthew's order of discipline. Except he missed step one and step two and went immediately to step three. I had sinned and would not repent and agree with him, so that was that. When I hear others speak of similar treatment, often after divorce, or gossip, or malicious slander, it breaks my heart, but at least I've been there, and can offer consolation. Then there are those who have been seriously and falsely maligned to the point of destroying their reputation or ministry, and keep silent, bearing the pain for years without recourse to support. Which brings us to a third difficulty with this Scripture. I've never ever seen a church that actually completely followed it.

When someone is wounded by another in the congregation, and they are brave enough to bring it to the Priest, there is usually much talk of forgiveness and mercy and "turning the other cheek", but there is seldom any "repairing" the damage, seeking reconciliation, working toward transformation of character or ensuring protection of others in the community. The liar, the manipulator, the petty, the angry are not confronted, not challenged, not called to new relationships or unity. And the wounded one is left with supportive words but no action whatsoever. Reputation scarred forever. That has also been my

experience. I promise you that I will never ignore conflict or knowingly sweep sin under the rug.

We are absolutely not prone to wanting to toss out sheep, and that is very, very good. Yet, because of that compassion, we sometimes allow wolves in sheep's clothing to ravage the flock, or indeed the shepherd, one by one. What we need to do is help the wolves actually **become** sheep in truth, in word and in deed.... through working together, two or three with Jesus in the midst, to seek the well-being and transformation that He longs to bring to every sinner's life. Thank goodness...or that's all we'd all still be....lost and alone in our sin.

The rest of the passage can seem difficult as well, but is actually quite clear and encouraging. Christians are empowered to take action in Jesus' name upon this earth. Just like Peter was told in Matthew 16:19, we are now all of us told that what we bind and what we loose will be bound and loosed in heaven. Now binding does not mean tying a sinner up in knots or condemning anyone to punishment...it means binding up as with bandages the wounded and fractured in body, mind and soul. When we do that, we are in accord with Heaven, with what God desires us to do. And when we loose someone, we are not casting them out from among us, we are helping them to be set free from sin and grow in the life and light of Christ.

I think the application of this Scripture for the glory of God and the wellness of the Body of Christ is essential. It takes courage, training, awareness, good faith and will, and the presence of Jesus when two or three are gathered together to confront conflict or indeed in every situation. It takes love which surpasses liking, and it takes a willingness to forgive and to be forgiven. The Church, at all levels, needs to discuss and pray and work to provide support to all who are in the midst of such conflict. I pray it will improve. I pray I will improve. If you need help, please holler! And please answer, if I need help too.

Not my most inspiring sermon for sure, but I tried, and I didn't select the Lectionary! God bless you all! Judie+

PS... golly how often does one get to do a ps in a sermon? Only in Scoops! Jesus says that "if two of you (disciples, followers, believers) on earth agree about anything they ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven, for where two

or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them". This promise has led to many strange, strange undertakings where two or three decide that they need a new car, or ask for winning lottery tickets, or pray down fire and brimstone on some offending brother or sister. What is overlooked, sadly and sinfully, is the condition that Jesus is in the midst of them when they gather in His name. Ergo, they must have the mind of Christ, and not ask for those things which are a/ contrary to His express teachings/will as proclaimed in Scripture or b/ absolutely frivolous and lacking common sense. In all things, we are to seek the mind of Christ and ask according to His will. That's it!

Prayer for Today

O God, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted upon us, remember rather all the fruit that has been born from this suffering.. our comradeship, loyalty, humility, courage, generosity, greatness of heart which has grown in us out of all this; and when they come to judgement let all the fruits which have been born in us be their forgiveness. (penned by an unknown prisoner in Ravensbruck Concentration Camp and left as a letter by the body of a deceased friend).

Lord, I offer also for those whom I have in any way grieved, vexed, oppressed or scandalized by word or deed, knowingly or unknowingly; that thou mayest equally forgive us all our sins and all our offences against each other. (Thomas à Kempis, circa 1442.)

Blessing:

Redeemed, forgiven, empowered, and blessed, may you go forth into the world renewed by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to live in abundant joy and love, and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be upon you and remain with you always! Amen.

