

Proper 18 A 2017
September 10, 2017 :: Matthew 18: 15-20
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“Loving the Other.”

Today’s gospel
is pretty easy to misinterpret,
as a story I’ll be telling you in a few minutes
illustrates.

Because it sounds like
Jesus is instituting a three-strikes rule
for dealing with conflicts.

But that’s actually not the case.

To really know what’s going on in our gospel,
we first need to look briefly
at our other readings,
from Ezekiel and Romans.

First Ezekiel.

The gist of what’s going on there
is that God is telling Ezekiel:

Listen, Ezekiel, you’re my mouthpiece.
If I see that some people are up to no good,
or are engaged in some activity
that will not end well for them,
I’m going to send you to them
with a message from me.

Now, if you *don't* deliver that message,
and it *doesn't* end well for them,
their blood is on *your* hands.

But if you *do* deliver the message,
and they ignore it,
and it goes badly for them,
their blood is on *their own* hands.

In other words, Ezekiel,
as God's mouthpiece,
has an obligation to those other people.
He is obliged to them.

And in very much the same way,
you and I, as the people of God,
as the hands, and feet, and voice,
of God in the world today,
are likewise obliged to the people around us.

And that takes us
to our reading from Romans.

Because St. Paul gives us a pretty good description
of what our obligation looks like.

At the very beginning of our reading,
Paul says,
 "Owe no one anything" —
which is to say, be obliged to no one —
 "except to love one another."
Except to love one another.

Now, I didn't look at the original Greek,
of this passage,
but I'll bet
that the NT Greek word
translated into English as "love,"
carries the exact same meaning
as the OT Hebrew word
translated into English as "love,"
in the OT passage that tells us
to love God with everything we have,
and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

That being the case —
and I think it is —
the obligation that we have towards others —
our obligation to "love one another" —
is *not* an obligation to feel affection,
because that's not what the Hebrew word means.

Rather,
what the Hebrew word means,
and therefore what St. Paul is telling us,
is that we have an obligation
to *do things* that help and benefit others.

That's what those Hebrew and Greek words mean.

And so, let me say it again:
our obligation is to do things
that help and benefit others.

(And if you're a Star Trek fan,
that is our "Prime Directive.")

And now,
we're ready to talk about our gospel reading,
where, as I mentioned before,
Jesus *seems* to be instituting a three-strikes rule
for dealing with conflicts.

But first,
the story I promised you.
And as you listen,
see if you can see
the three-strikes rule at work.

It's a true story.

About 100 years ago,
most of the churches,
situated in the foothills of Virginia,
were against tobacco.
But most simply ignored the fact
that many of their members
were either tobacco farmers,
or worked in tobacco factories.

Except, that is, for the good people
of the Pentecostal Holiness Church;
they took their anti-tobacco stance seriously.

And so, every spring,
when the farmers in their congregation
were planting their tobacco crops,
the Preacher would go and see them.

And he would read to them
a passage from
the Pentecostal Holiness Book of Discipline
which forbids involvement in “the tobacco trade.”

And then the preacher would read to them
a passage from Matthew's gospel—
which was our gospel reading this morning.

A few weeks later
the Preacher brought two elders with him
and repeated his performance.

And then, some time before Memorial Day,
the women and children of the congregation
gathered in solemn assembly
to excommunicate their fathers, and husbands,
and their brothers, and sons.

And then, basically,
once that was done,
everyone would go home
to their Sunday dinner.

However, a few months later,
in the Fall,
after everyone had harvested their crop
and sold their tobacco,
the women and children would gather again
and vote their menfolk back in —
just in time, it should be noted,
for the church to collect a tithe
on the proceeds of the tobacco sales.

End of story.

First of all, I admire the good people of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, for taking their scripture so seriously.

However, at the same time, I have to acknowledge that *they missed entire point of our gospel reading!*

And that's because they misunderstood what Jesus meant when he said — after describing the three steps —
“let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

So, what is the correct interpretation of that quote?

To answer that question, I turned to the writings of William Barclay, a much-respected New Testament scholar and teacher, whom I'll paraphrase to save time.

In the gospels, when Jesus speaks of Gentiles and tax-collectors, he always does so with sympathy and gentleness, and with an appreciation of their good qualities.

Therefore, it may well be that what Jesus was saying was something like this:

When you have done everything you can
to be reconciled with someone who has offended you,
and they remain stubborn and unrepentant,
you may be tempted to think of him
as no better than
a godless Gentile, or a renegade tax-collector.

And you may be right.

But in my experience,
I have not found Gentiles and tax-collectors
to be a hopeless case.

In fact,
it's been my experience
that they, too,
have a heart to be touched;
and there are many of them,
like Matthew and Zacchaeus,
who have become my best friends.

And so, even if the stubborn offender
is like a tax-collector or a Gentile,
you may still win him over,
as I have done many times.

End of quote.

And so, what we have here
in our gospel reading,
is a story that all too many people
have used to push away
members of their own faith community.

When in fact,
it's a story that was intended
to give us advice
on how to be *reconciled* to people
in our faith community.

In other words,
our gospel reading was giving us an example
of how we are,
as St. Paul described it,
to "love one another."

And, while having good relationships
with the members of your faith community
is certainly important,
perhaps even more important
is the question of
how we have good relationships
in general
with people who are different from us.

How do we "love" them?

That is, how do we act in ways that
help and benefit them?

For example:

How do we "love" someone
whose skin is a different color than ours?

Or

How do we “love” someone
who speaks a different language?

Or

How do we “love” someone
from a different faith group?

Or,

How do we “love” someone
who comes from a different country?

In this world,
there are so many people
who are different from us.

There are so many people
who are “other,”
who are “them,”
who are “not us.”

How do we “love” them?

How do we act in ways that
help and benefit them?

Sometimes, these questions
can be very hard to answer,
and make us feel uncomfortable.

And the answer may well be different
in each individual case.

But how we answer them
will say a lot about who we are
as the people of God.

And how we answer them
will say a lot
about our faith in God.

But answer them we must.

Because our reading from Ezekiel
reminds us that we have an obligation
to “them,”
to those “others,”
to those who are “not us.”

And because our reading from Romans
reminds us that our obligation
is to “love” them,
to help and benefit them.

Even when we think
they don’t deserve it.

Let us pray:

O God, you made us in your own image
and redeemed us through Jesus your Son:
Look with compassion on the whole human family;
take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts;
break down the walls that separate us;
unite us in bonds of love;
and work through our struggle and confusion
to accomplish your purposes on earth;
that, in your good time,
all nations and races
may serve you in harmony
around your heavenly throne;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.