

This Sunday's texts:

Deuteronomy 16:13-15

Ephesians 4:11-16

Matthew 18:10-18

Kingdom Community

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The holy gospel according to Matthew, the 18th chapter:

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way, your Father in Heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 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.

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Lord, we are grateful for your presence among us. We pray that your presence in truth and love will impact our relationships, will allow us to treat one another with respect and with joy. Bless us this day as we think about your love and your sovereignty in the midst of our community. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I'm going to do my best to move through this material but there's a lot of it today and it's really, really good stuff. I want to encourage you to hold on to your bulletin and make sure you note the references that we're looking at today, so that if necessary when you go home, you can go back and look at them again and think about just the beauty of God's plan for his people.

In Ephesians, in the early part of our reading today, we are told that the reason God has gifted and put does this leadership of gifts in the midst of his people is to equip them for the work of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. Understand that God blesses us so that we can strengthen and build up this body of Christ, this community of faith that we celebrate together. Our intentions are in connecting with one another, in sharing with one another, in arguing together even over where we should go or what the scripture teaches us to be motivated and to bear fruit by building us up as a body of Christ. We're going to see that more and more as we move through these lessons today.

There's this beautiful, but very, very hard text in Ephesians 4:15. We are called to speak the truth in love. Now that's as opposed to *not* speaking the truth in love. Have any of you ever not spoken the truth in love? Let me give you a little instance. “If you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all.” It's also as opposed to speaking the truth, not in love. Has anybody ever been clubbed over the head with the truth? Do you have that tendency yourself? No hands. A lot of times, when we think we are right, and we think the other person is wrong, especially we men, but really all of us, we can get aggressive in our handling of the truth. We want love to be at the center of how we conduct ourselves as the people of God together in this place. Even if correction is needed, even if truth needs to shine the light on some darkness, some brokenness, some sin, we want to do it in a spirit of love.

Listen to Ephesians 4:16. It says this. "He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow."¹ You are here. You are blessed for a reason. A part of the reason that God is blessing your life with gifts, with abilities, with insights, with all kinds of different resources is so that you can build up others in the body of Christ around you. And for those of you who love to do it for yourself - that independent streak, you know what I'm talking about, understand that God has put this whole community around you to help build you up. So don't deny them the opportunity to serve you. Accept that service in joy, love, and gratitude, knowing that you're going to have many opportunities where you're going to be able to do likewise to others in the community with the gift you have. Understand that that's God's desire, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

Do you get that? Do you understand that you are blessed by God so that you can be a part of making this community stronger and healthier? If you withdraw, we all lose. If you engage with aggressiveness, anger, or reactivity, we all lose. But if we use the gifts of God and speak the truth in love, our whole body as a community of faith gets stronger and better. Those of you that have been around St Timothy's for a while know the joy of what that means because you've been on that journey. You've already experienced how that mutual blessing has been poured out into your life.

Then as we move to the gospel of Matthew and especially as we move to that place where it talks about how we are supposed to deal with conflict, I want to make sure we very quickly understand the context of Matthew 18. It starts by reminding us that the one who is greatest in the kingdom is the one who serves. It reminds us of the need for humility in our acts of service together. Then it talks about woe to the one who creates a stumbling block for the other.² Scary.

Then it says do not despise the little ones.³ Now, little ones. What are little ones? I think we can absolutely understand the little ones are the young people, who are watching how we act to learn how they should act. But we might also understand little ones to be little, if you will, in the place of influence, people who are marginalized in some way, whose voices have been reduced in the community. Be extra careful in how we handle those who are on the fringes, on the margins of our community. It's a theme throughout scripture. It's a reminder throughout, especially from many of the prophets of the Old Testament. Be careful how you treat the widow, the orphan, the stranger, those who have lost power in community. Be extra careful that you use your gifts, your abilities, your blessings from God to build them up.

And then, it [Matthew 18] comes to this question of conflict. If your brother or sister sins against you, go to your friend and tell them all about it. Go to your Bible study or your grow group and complain all about them. Go home and argue with your wife or your husband and tell him what an idiot this person wants. No. No. Go to that person privately one-on-one and share your concern. I want you to understand something here, based on the humility of the earlier part of the chapter. One of the things that might happen when you go to that person one-on-one to discuss your concern, I know you're going to have a hard time believing this, but I've experienced it so many times, I'm telling you it's true, sometimes what you find out is you misunderstood. Sometimes you find out that you interpreted what was being said or done in a way that they never intended. And so the reconciliation that happens is not necessarily going to be them telling you they're sorry for whatever you brought. It may, in fact, be you're saying, "I'm sorry. I misunderstood. I'm so glad now to understand and know your heart and your intent."

¹ NLT translation

² Matthew 18:7 NASB 1995

³ Matthew 18:10 NASB 1995

But if the sin remains and the difference remains, we still got another task to do. We don't just go home and go "Oh well, I tried." No, now we need to find a couple of other people. By the way, a couple of other people who are also witnesses, that is, who also understand what happened, who also have a perspective on what's happening. And then we go and have that conversation. Now, we're just talking about four people here. We're not talking here about the whole group, not talking about your whole Bible study. We're just saying we need to, maybe put a little more emphasis on the problem that is being created by whatever it was that was done, the hurt that is being caused, the distance that is happening in the relationship, so that we can reconcile.

If that doesn't work, they say take it to the church. And if that doesn't work, they say treat them as a tax collector and sinner. Now here's my problem with that last step. Here's my problem with "treat them as a tax collector and sinner." You can understand that in two ways. From the perspective of the Jewish elite, if you will, in the New Testament times, developed through the Old Testament times, basically it's like stay away from those people. They're unclean. Don't go near them. Don't have anything to do with them. That would be one way you could interpret that text. Essentially put them out of the community. If they're not building up the body of Christ, if they're tearing down the body of Christ, put them out of the community. Whew! That's rough stuff. In fact, Paul did that in 1st Corinthians with a man who refused to obey, repent. It's also interesting that in 2nd Corinthians, there's an inference to that that says, okay, he's been out long enough; go reconcile. Because the other way we can understand tax collectors and sinners is, yes, they're on the outside, so do whatever you can to bring them in. Jesus called tax collectors and sinners to be his apostles. Jesus loved those who were outside and treated them with incredible dignity and love, so that they could be brought back in. But you don't treat them as teachers. You don't treat them as influencers in their unrepentant state. Does that make sense?

Well, let's move on. So again, we see the rhythm, the pattern. There's a first step, the personal appeal. The second stage is a private appeal with just a few people. Then the third stage is a public appeal. I want to tell you how often this happens in the church. Rarely. Rarely do God's people here in this place have the courage to do one-on-one before they've talked about it to somebody else. Rarely do they have the perseverance to follow up with a couple of other people, keeping the matter still quiet, but still dealing with it. And rarely do they believe in the matter strongly enough that they're going to bring it to the community to be dealt with. Instead, they're just going to let it go. All of which hurts the community of faith.

But I also want to remind you of the context again. I want to remind you of where Matthew 18 came from and where it goes. It comes from that place of humility. It comes from that place of concern for those who are less powerful in our midst and it ends in this promise. Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.⁴ Wherever two or three are gathered in my name. Mmmm. When did that happen? Throughout the whole process. When you go one-on-one, that's two. Wherever two or three are gathered in my name. When you go with two or three witnesses, that's more than three. God is present with us, as we live out this challenge of being a community of God's people, living through the realities of our personalities, the realities of our struggles. God is present with us.

And then the text moves to this beautiful understanding of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, we see seven primary feasts throughout the year. As we move through those feasts, three of them are supposedly feasts in which the males, presumably with their families, make the journey to the place that God determines, Jerusalem, generally speaking, the temple generally. The

⁴ Matthew 18:20

first one is Passover. The second one is Pentecost, fifty days after Passover and presumably after the incoming first harvest. Then the third one is the Feast of Tabernacles. A Feast of Tabernacles was referred to in our reading today. The Feast of Tabernacles is a week-long party. Multiple times in our text, it says and when you come together, come together *joyfully*, celebrating the provision of God. It happens after the fall harvest, when the barns are full. The resources are strung. Come together and celebrate with God's people. In fact, the text says to invite all those other people too. You know, the slaves, the widows, and the orphans - all those other people, not just your immediate family. Invite all those other people to come along with you and party together. Celebrate the habitation, the dwelling of God.

Before I get to that, let me just point something out. These three middle Jewish holidays are Rosh Hashanah - Jewish New Year, Yom Kippur - Day of Atonement, followed by the Feast of Tabernacles - this seven-day celebration of dwelling with God. Yom Kippur immediately precedes the Feast of Tabernacles. The Day of Atonement immediately precedes the week of celebration of God's people together. Are you hearing me? Are you picking up on this? Reconciliation between God and his people, reconciliation between his people and one another - that's what atonement is all about. It's atoning for the sins that separate us, both from God and one another. And as a result of that atonement, now we come together to celebrate the habitation of God, to celebrate that God is in the midst of his people. Is this a special place to be? You know it is. Why? Because God is here. Because God is here with the power to reconcile, with the power to set us free so that we can celebrate together.

I had a mom say to me a couple of years ago as Mother's Day was coming that she was glad that her children were not coming because they couldn't get along. That's heartbreaking. I've been told by many members over the years who have left the churches I serve because they couldn't get along with another member. That was heartbreaking. If we could experience the presence and the power of God to weave us together as a community of faith, so we can experience the atonement, the forgiveness for us, and through us for others, then we can let the party begin. Then we can celebrate what God is doing in the midst of us. Then we can be free to fully use our gifts to bless each other. Then we never have the inkling "well, they don't deserve my time" or "well, I don't deserve their time." "I don't deserve their help." "Please don't trouble yourself by bringing me a meal when I'm sick." "Please don't trouble yourself by visiting me." Brothers and sisters in Christ, God calls us to be his people to celebrate. This is an image of the Tabernacle, the booth. It's typically made of certain raw wood. It's a lighter structure. But then it gets decorated. It gets decorated with fruit around the top. It's in the midst of the scarcity that sometimes is a part of our life, we recognize the provision of God that comes in the harvest, that came for the people of God as they traveled in the wilderness. We celebrate the gifts of God poured into our community. We are called to be a kingdom that feasts together as the people of God, that celebrate together. We are the family of God.

News flash: mark your calendars - June 26th. On Sunday, June 26th, St Timothy's is going to celebrate together, following our worship service, our sixty years as a congregation. We're going to have a lunch and a party and a picnic in Fellowship Hall. Out in front, we're going to have stuff for kids to do. We're going to have places where, we hope, adults can talk in relative quiet, as they celebrate and feast together about the goodness of God. Marilyn loves to say and I hope we will live out. "Celebrate the good stuff," the presence of the Living God at work in our community, helping us to love and build one another up in Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.