

September 4, 2011 12th Sunday After Pentecost Matthew 18:15-20

A man went to his doctor because he had been, shall we say, "misbehaving." The doctor said to him, "I'm sorry but I don't think I can help you. I don't have any medicine that can change your behavior. I can however refer you to a psychiatric specialist." "No, no, no," said the man, "You misunderstand. I don't want you to give me medicine to stop my behavior. I wonder if there is medicine so I don't feel guilty about my behavior."

Our gospel reading for today is about discipline for bad behavior - although not just the "bad behavior" hinted at in that little joke. This reading is all about how do you handle someone in the church who is destructive and hurtful? I want to look at the text and the principles behind it so that we can apply it to our own lives.

First, let's remember these verses in their proper context. Jesus has previously preached, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get."

We know that teaching well. Don't judge other people. Judgment is God's role. Try as we might we just don't have a big enough picture to judge effectively. However, that does not mean that we do nothing. Lawlessness would overrun the land, and so we have a justice system to keep evil in check.

Of course lawlessness and evil don't just exist outside the church. They can also exist here. We might like to think we can live with each other without ever having to judge; being nice to everyone all the time, but at a very practical level that doesn't work. Jesus knew that and so he gave this teaching.

When I was in seminary I saw a good example of applying our gospel reading. It was my senior year and some underclassmen had created a study group to prepare for an exam. One of them made a study sheet for the group, and as we were taught, this person put her name on the top. All was fine and good until copies of this study sheet were circulated at a different study group without the person's name. We discovered that one student had taken the study sheet, covered over the author's name,

photocopied it, and distributed it at this other study group as her own work.

Now of course in the grand scheme of things this was pretty petty plagiarism. However, it was stealing someone else's work. It devalued the creator's work and it brought into serious question the integrity of the student who passed it off as her own. To simply say "forgive and forget" or to refuse to judge wasn't going to work. And so the student ethics board was called to intercede.

Now I was on the student ethics board. I thought this would be an easy board to be on because it hadn't met for over 40 years. But here we had this little case before us. To my surprise I learned that the seminary's constitution cited our gospel reading, Matthew 18:15-20, as the legal process to be followed in student misconduct. Incidentally it is also in our church's constitution... when the Bible's word becomes the literal law.

And so, in our little ethics case as seminary we had to ask, "Did the student whose work was stolen go and point out the

fault to the one who stole it?" Now, why would this be the case? Why confront someone individually rather than going directly to the dean or the student misconduct board?

Why? For two reasons. One, the person who caused the offense may not know they committed the offense. That was not the case in the situation I was a part of, but it is very possible that you could hurt or deeply offend someone without even knowing it. When the person who is hurt starts by confronting the one who hurt him or her simple misunderstandings can be dealt with quickly and easily. Perhaps the offender will be shocked at what happened and apologize. The second reason to individually confront the wrongdoer is that it makes the hurt person take courage. You can't get away with just complaining about someone's conduct behind his or her back to your friends. That doesn't build or strengthen community. That tears it down. Jesus' whole point here is to have a discipline system that strengthens community. Gossip and backbiting doesn't do that.

The next step we looked into as the student misconduct board was if this step didn't work did the offended student get two or three witnesses and confront the person a second time.

Now, why this step? Jesus is building on Jewish law in Leviticus 19. In order to level charges against someone there needs to be at least two witnesses. Jesus incorporates this idea of witnesses, or perhaps it would be clearer if we called them "neutral observers," so they can protect both parties from being misrepresented.

If this doesn't work then you take the issue to the whole congregation. In the case of the seminary it was the student misconduct board. This is an important step. Problems in recent years with priests and clergy shows what happens when real problems are brushed under the rug. The situation gets worse, and accountability never happens. Offenders go on repeating their offenses.

In the case of the student at seminary, she got off on procedural technicalities because the pattern Jesus laid out was not followed. However, she was later removed from seminary for other issues. And that brings us to the final points of what Jesus taught. What if the wrongdoer doesn't repent? What if the wrongdoer is found guilty by the whole congregation and refuses to change his or her behavior?

When the whole congregation ways in on these matters it does so with a spirit of love and forgiveness, but there is teeth to its actions. Jesus gives the church permission to do more than just slap wrists. The church can kick out the offending person. Is this to preserve the holiness of the church? No. It is to bring straying members to an awareness of their sins, and hopefully they will eventually repent and be restored.

From the beginning to the end Jesus' directions here are intended to build up community. They are intended to restore broken relationships and hold others accountable. Paul S. Minear in his book *Matthew: The Teacher's Gospel* (Pg 102) says this, "Here we see developing the earliest legal procedures for excommunication, procedures designed to protect both the individual and the community. The sinner is guarded against arbitrariness and hasty action brought by a single individual or even by two or three leader. The leader is protected from his own prejudices and from hasty action. The congregation is guarded from violent disruption and from the slow erosion of unresolved antagonisms."

Hopefully we do not have to face issues of this magnitude often, but these principles go for every aspect of our lives. It takes both courage and compassion to live this way. You can be neither a tyrant nor a doormat.

May God give you both courage and compassion for your life. May you be strong in your faith, but open to the feedback of others. And may you find strength and energy through other people of faith so that your work may not be a personal burden, but a community calling to which all work together for the kingdom of God. Amen