

Lectionary 23 A 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

September 10, 2017

Matthew 18:15-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

On these late summer Sundays, we have been reading segments from the gospel of Matthew which address the matter of *being church*. Matthew's gospel is the only gospel to use the actual word "church." And it only uses it twice. In today's gospel reading, and in the gospel reading two weeks ago...when Peter recognized Jesus as the Messiah and Son of the Living God, prompting Jesus to proclaim Peter as the rock on which Jesus would build his church. And giving Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven, saying that whatever he, Peter, bound on earth would be bound in heaven; and that whatever Peter loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven.

Those exact words— that exact promise— is now given to all of the disciples, in today's gospel reading, two chapters later. In verse 18 today, Jesus says, to everyone: *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.*

So on these late summer Sundays, the Gospel according to Matthew is pushing into our faces what Jesus said about the Church, and the Church's identity, and the Church's authority, and the grave responsibility of the Church's authority.

So I took today's gospel to a friend of mine who is Jewish. A good friend, with a big heart and an open mind. And I can go to him with one of these stories that I have literally been hearing since I was old enough to hear. And he hears it for the first time. And he always gives me a fresh perspective. How do these words of Jesus sound to someone for the first time?

And I'll tell you what my friend said, but first I'll tell you what I think. Because I'm sure my explanation is the right one. And my friend's explanation is not the right one. But you be the judge.

Jesus says today that if someone has wronged you, then speak to that person privately. And if that doesn't work, go a second time, and take a friend or two. And if that doesn't work, then on the third and last try, take it to the church. And I am confident that what Jesus is talking about here in today's gospel is resolving the conflict, resolving the wrong, *privately*. *Discreetly*. Do not use public shame as a first resort. If somebody is wrong, the first resort is to talk to them one-on-one. Going public is the last resort. That's what I think Jesus is talking about.

Now my Jewish friend, hearing this for the first time, said this teaching, this command from

Jesus, is about dialog, and getting to the truth. Because when you are mad at someone, when you are upset with someone, it is often the result of a misunderstanding. So before you go nuclear, talk to the person. Before you go nuclear, get a trusted friend involved. As a last resort, before you go nuclear, have a community discussion. So my Jewish friend thinks the policy commanded by Jesus is about getting the facts right. My Jewish friend evaluates this with fresh ears and fresh eyes. He thinks Jesus is talking about listening. For me, it's about dealing with a problem without public shaming, without embarrassment, without humiliation, without drama. My Jewish friend, by the way, his name is Mel Brooks. A lovely man, a real mensch.

But you know what? Whether my friend is right, or whether I am right, we agree that Jesus is instructing us to protect the person who is accused of sinning. To protect the person whom we think has hurt us. To be fair and to be generous. And this is, first of all, good advice for everyone in our society. Everyone we know. Christian or Jewish, spiritual or atheist, Republican or Democrat, white person or person of color. Slow down, show respect, listen, and don't be a drama queen.

The things that we call the media? People say the media has a liberal bias. People say the media has a conservative bias. Yes, and yes, surely. But the media has a "sensationalizing" bias. Our culture maximizes drama, it maximizes conflict. It feeds our addictions. Our addictions to anger, and our addictions to fear. And we can DIRECTLY participate in the media now. You and I can go live with our most impulsive thoughts; you can I can broadcast to the whole world whatever we think in the same moment that we think it.

BUT MAYBE WE SHOULDN'T. That is surely some of what Jesus is saying today. Before you go nuclear, before you go planetary, talk one-on-one with your opponent, the one that, in the words of Jesus, has sinned against you. Jesus is acknowledging that it won't always work. "*Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*" Break ups will happen. Jesus is clear about that. But that is the last resort. The first resort should be to respect the dignity of the person whom we feel has wronged us. To confront those things honestly, directly, and discreetly. As the first resort. Our culture, our media, seduce us into doing the opposite. We get instant gratification when we spout off. When we avoid dealing with a situation, and go running around telling everyone else about it. That's wrong, Jesus says. And that is, first of all, good advice for everyone in our society. Christian or Jewish, spiritual or atheist, Republican or Democrat, white person or person of color. Slow down, show respect, listen, and don't be a drama queen.

Before I sit down, I want to say something about "binding and loosing." "*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*" In the Roman Catholic tradition and in the Lutheran tradition that is understood to be the ability to forgive sins. The power of the Church— perhaps the power of the clergy— to forgive sins.

But. Whenever we read the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus is always involved in the matters of Jewish Law. Sometimes, in Matthew, Jesus relaxes the interpretation of the Law. Sometimes, in Matthew, Jesus tightens the interpretations of the Law. Sometimes, Jesus binds. And sometimes, Jesus looses. [So] In today's reading from the Gospel According to Matthew, when Jesus says that the Church— not just Peter, but THE CHURCH— when Jesus says that the

Church can bind and loosen, Jesus probably means that the Church can tighten the Ten Commandments and human conscience. And sometimes the Church can loosen the Ten Commandments and human conscience.

I was ordained as a pastor by Bishop Paul Blom. I served two congregations under his leadership. Lutherans get into vicious arguments about who can lead the Sunday celebration of holy communion. Some militant Lutherans believe that only an authorized person (like me) can be in charge of communion. Other militant Lutherans believe that anybody can lead the Sunday celebration of the Lord's Supper. By the nature of their job, bishops are forced to make decisions about this. Who can lead communion in a local congregation like Dove of Peace, when the regular pastor is unavailable. And who cannot. Bishop Blom, like most of the other bishops, had to deal with that question.

I remember that Bishop Blom once said that we have huge arguments about who can be in charge of communion, and who can distribute communion, but we'll let any idiot preach in the pulpit. And in my experience, that's true. The pulpit is the place where someone talks about right and wrong, about good and bad. And experienced pastors like me are usually hesitant to lay down the law. What Paul wrote in our second lesson is how experienced pastors see it: *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.* It's unlikely that you'll get loud, hell fire and brimstone sermon from a preacher like me. Or from any wiser, older, experienced pastor. But put a lay person in the pulpit, and they may not hold back. I've heard a few of those sermons. They will bind and loose, and condemn and bless, and pour out all kinds of black and white answers, with all kinds of fervor. People yearn to hear that. Bishop Blom pointed out that we'll let any old idiot preach, but if someone is going to lead communion, we put them under enormous scrutiny.

Binding and loosing has been interpreted in many ways. Jesus is using a metaphor, of tying things up, and untying things. Classically, this means that the Church alone can forgive sins. And in the fourth gospel, John's Gospel, Jesus clearly gives that power. There is no metaphor there. Jesus talks there about forgiving sins, and retaining sins. But in the context of Matthew, where this is presented by Jesus as a metaphor of tying up and untying, I think that it is the teaching power of the church, the authority of a leader or leaders to define acceptable behavior and unacceptable behavior. Remember, when Jesus spoke these words, there was no formal classification of clergy, no ordained priests, elders, deacons, bishops, pastors. But Bishop Blom thought— and I agree with him— that for someone to stand in a pulpit and describe the normative behavior for the church requires more judgment, more skill, and more wisdom, than the ritual actions of communion which can be done properly by anyone who can read.

In any case, Jesus imposes great restrictions and accountability on all who bear authority in his church and in his name, and Jesus describes grave consequences on all who abuse that authority. Amen.