

Text: Matthew 18:15-22
Title: *A broken people in a broken world*

Matthew 18:12-22 *NRSV*

¹²If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

¹⁵ ‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by God in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ ²²Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’

This past Wednesday I was standing on the corner of 8th and Bannock at a demonstration against the Death Penalty. There have been people in Boise standing on that corner on Wednesdays from noon-1p in protest of the Death Penalty for around twenty years. I was standing, there with those faithful people this past week, and after being introduced as the pastor of Hyde Park Mennonite Fellowship, someone mentioned how great the Mennonites are – how wonderful this group is – how it is a group who lives their faith. And this is pretty amazing, it shows the larger reputation that this group has established in the community over the years. However, I also always get a little nervous when people talk about “how great the Mennonites are.” I get nervous that they might someday come to our church and they will find out, what we who are inside this building already know, that we are not perfect – that we are just as human as other followers of Jesus.

This is an amazing group of people. There is literally not a week that goes by that I am not inspired by someone here or something that comes out of this congregation – be it in a conversation I have with one of you, or something that I see was done by someone. We are a great group of people, and we are flawed. We are a community of humans who stumble, who disagree, who even hurt each other at times.

And we are part of a Mennonite denomination who, in my view, holds a powerful and world-changing theology of following Jesus in all parts of our lives. And, we rarely are able to live-up to our own beliefs. We are a denomination made up of humans.

As we continue to think about the church, one of the core starting places for any community is trust. We cannot function without trust. Thanks to Zach for helping to illustrate this for us this morning during our Children's Time. This is true of our particular community of faith, we must have a high level of trust with each other to be able to function as a community. You trust in me, to allow me to get up here each week and speak – trust that I have something to offer on your spiritual journey (at least, most weeks); trust in each other as we make decisions about our common life; trust as we make some financial decisions together – that we actually share some of our financial resources with this group of people – in our culture, that requires trust.

In the church, in a community of faith, the only way we can really function is through trusting one another. In assuming the best of each other. What I mean by this is that we trust each other's motives, that we trust that people are trying to do what they think is right. When we disagree with someone or have a different perspective, we try to begin from a place of trusting their intent – trusting that they are trying to do what they believe is right; that they are, in this particular decision or action, trying to come from a place of faithfulness. When we start to question someone's motives or intentions, when we think that someone has a hidden agenda or that they don't care as much as we care, trust then breaks down – the ability to work as a community breaks down.

This sometimes requires us to listen generously to each other, to try and listen to the core of what another person is saying. Sometimes, especially when we are speaking in front of a group or have some emotion around what we are saying, we don't always communicate clearly, and so we should try to ask of each other, "what are they trying to say; what are they intending to

say; what is the best of what they are saying?” Or when we have a different view than someone, we seek to understand why we have this difference of opinion.

Trust, thinking the best of each other, this doesn't mean we don't put protections in place. We trust each other, and we have a new Child Safety Plan that we are working to put in place. We trust each other, and we put financial protections in place – the person who writes a check can't sign the check. I can't sign checks. Lauresta can't sign checks. This does not mean we don't have trust, it means that we are trying to be the best community we can be and that safeguards help us to build trust; they help to not be tempted to break the trust established. Boundaries build trust.

And, there are of course times when this trust is broken.

When I was at Hesston College, my last semester there, I signed-up for a 'Special Education' class. I had no intention of being a teacher, but during my time there, I had found that the professor who taught this class was a man of great passion and integrity. So, when my academic advisor questioned why I wanted to drop a Bible class and add an Education class, I said that I just feel like I should take a class from this person – I feel like it would do me good to learn from this person.

Recently, that professor was arrested for inappropriate sexual misconduct. Our trust is sometimes broken.

When we learn a colleague or acquaintance we don't know well has talked about us behind our back, or hurt us in some way, that is hard to deal with – it is painful. But when we are hurt by someone who we trusted, someone who we believed we had a good relationship with, someone who is within our church family – this is a much deeper level of hurt and pain; the pain of betrayal; a type of hurt that can make it hard to extend out trust to anyone again.

It is not hard for most of us to acknowledge that the larger Christian church is imperfect, that the Christian church has caused a lot of hurt and pain. Since the Roman Empire became “Christian” after emperor Constantine, Christians participated in the Crusades and the Inquisition; we helped pave the way for the wiping out of American Indians, and some backed slavery with Biblical underpinnings. The church has covered-up for priests and pastors and professors and leaders how have done terrible sexual violence. We all know that, as an institution, the church has done much harm –times when the larger institutions of the Christian Church have prioritized survival to truth or justice.

In a less obvious way, the institutional church is slow to change. This too has been hurtful and harmful for many. We create institutions and structure around things that we value, things we deem of great importance that we want to pass on to future generations. We create institutions to protect and duplicate that which we value and cherish. And, when we create institutions they become big and cumbersome – they are hard to change because of what they are, entities created for preservation and passing-on. This makes institutions largely conservative – not politically conservative, conservative in that they are slow to change. For the most part, this

is important I think, to have something that is rooted. However, when we are too slow to change, when the institutional survival is prioritized over fresh expressions of God's Spirit on the move – this is painful for those ready to move, those ready to act on those fresh expressions. It is painful for those who are continually told, “wait, not quite yet; slower, your time is coming.” Martin Luther King, Jr., in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” talked about how his greatest internal pain was not from overt bigots and racists and governments, but from moderate white Christians, from those who said, “not quite yet Martin. Just wait a bit. We agree with your message but not with your tactics.” This is one of the ways that the institution of the Christian Church has done harm – in our slowness to change, in our slowness to recognize where the Spirit of God is moving in new and fresh ways, inviting us to join in.

And in individual faith communities like ours, we have also done harm. This is part of being human. To be human is to disagree. To be human is to have conflict, to offend and to be offended. None of us are free from this. It is part of being the creature and not the Creator; it is part of being a fallible human being. I agree with Nadia Bolz-Weber, pastor of All Sinners and Saints church in Denver, when she says, “Every human community will disappoint us, regardless of how well-intentioned or inclusive.”

Some of the ways we hurt each other and break trust include when we:

- Speak about others behind their back
- When we fail to go to someone who has hurt us, not trusting our relationship to handle this conflict.
- When we say, “it is alright, I will let it go” when we know we can't let it go – when we know that we will carry a grudge against that person or group.
- In avoiding conflict [this is where I struggle]. When we don't bring something up that we see is painful or harmful. Or, when we write a new policy instead of simply talking to the individuals involved in a situation.

In Matthew 18, the passage we read this morning, Jesus describes in surprising detail the conversational process for reconciliation and forgiveness among his followers. Jesus lays out a process in which three efforts at reconciliation must be made before accepting the fact that the offender refuses to be “won.” The process begins by going to the person who has hurt us or caused us harm. This is quite different from how we usually work. Especially, if you are like me and you don’t love conflict and tension. The initiative is not for the bishop or conference minister or even for the pastor, it is for the one who has been hurt or offended. To try and clear-up the misunderstanding. Or, to let them know that they hurt you in what they did or said. To give them a chance to hear you or to apologize, or to understand where they were coming from.

But more amazing than even the process laid out by Jesus, is simply the reality that these words even exist. The fact that these words of Jesus exist tell us that conflict will happen among his followers, we will have conflict and disagreements and hurt within the church. If Jesus gave us instructions for how to handle pain and conflict within the church, then we can be certain that it will happen. **Conflict does not mean even that we are doing church wrong, it simply means that we are human.** To be human is to have difference and conflict. To be human is to offend and to be offended; to be hurt and to cause hurt.

A sacrament is the word used for when divine activity and human activity coincide. This is not a word really used in the Mennonite church, we generally think of it as a Catholic term of concept: the sacrament of baptism, or confession, or marriage, or Eucharist – when human

activity and divine activity coincide. Some groups of Christians call these things ordinances. Some call them practices or rituals. Whatever we call it, it is the concept and not the term that is important, the concept of sacred moments where we believe the divine and human to be overlapping, coinciding.

When Jesus says, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” he is telling us that reconciliation is a sacrament – that working toward a process of reconciliation is place where divine and human activity are overlapping. What makes followers of Jesus unique is not our ability to be perfect, not our ability to avoid hurting one another, but our belief that God is present in our process of reconciliation and forgiveness. That the process of seeking understanding and forgiveness is a sacrament.

We are a place that believes in the sacrament of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is the work of the church. It is the work of a lifetime. May we be such a sacramental people – a people of healing and hope. Amen.

