

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year A

BOUND TO GOD'S PROMISES

Matthew 18:15-20

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Analysis by Bruce K Modahl

15If 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 my Father in heaven. 20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."



DIAGNOSIS: At Odds

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Conflict

The church is the herald of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God may be at hand, but it is not yet in hand. Evidence reveals the seven deadly sins are alive and well in the church. Wherever two or three church members are gathered, there is bound to be conflict.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Trust the Process

Many church constitutions use Matthew 18:15-17 in the process of resolving conflict in the church. All too often these verses are not employed in the service of reconciliation, but as steps that must be taken to get rid of the troublesome person or group. Those in power know the mind of God; they have the correct

interpretation of scripture.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Cast Out

If the errant individual or group will not acknowledge their error and repent, they must be cast out, canceled, excommunicated, and removed from the membership role. “Let such a one be to you as a pagan and a tax collector,” says Jesus.

The pointed finger, if it is ours (and God knows it has been mine on more than one occasion), gets bent back toward us by the parable that follows these verses about the self-righteous servant. What makes us think we have God in our back pocket? What if we are the ones in the wrong? Then we are among the cast out.

Worst of all, Jesus’ words seem to give an eternal stamp on the decision to expel. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.”

PROGNOSIS: Reconciled

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is (Eternal Solution): An Outcast Lord

“Let them be to you as pagan Gentiles and tax collectors,” says Jesus. He shows us the process he has in mind with his instructions in Matthew 18. Jesus ate with tax collectors (Matthew 9:10-11) and enrolled one as a disciple. He had mercy on pagan Gentiles (Matthew 8:5-13; 15:21-28). Those who counted Jesus’ actions as sin brought witnesses to testify to his error. After they had followed their process to the letter of the law, they cast him out of the city’s gates and put him to death between two other outcasts. Jesus was cast as far from God’s presence as anyone can be. In becoming an outcast, he makes God present within the halls of death and causes a breach in hell’s defenses. He becomes the Outcast in order to reconcile all

outcasts to God. This Outcast is not stranded in the nether reaches, but rises from the grave, ascends to God's high throne, and promises to bear with him all who live in him by faith.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trust the Promise Giver

It is true that wherever two or three church members are gathered, there is bound to be conflict. The promise Jesus makes is that he is also present. We trust the promise and the Promise Giver to work reconciliation among us as he has reconciled us to God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Binding and Loosing

In exercising the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18) we bind ourselves and one another to God's promises and loosen one another from resentment, grievance, sin, and the guilt that comes with a troubled conscience. This work begins with the proclamation of Christ crucified and raised, who thereby reconciles us to God and breaks down the walls of hostility dividing us one from another (Eph. 2:14).

God's grace is made known in the hard work of seeking reconciliation. This work requires courage because it means going to the person who has wronged us and telling them in gentleness and humility the wrong we have experienced. They may reject us or lodge a complaint against us. We indeed may be the one in the wrong and must be ready to acknowledge as much, and seek forgiveness from the person we have wronged. In my experience joyous reconciliation usually occurs at this first conversation. It feels like a resurrection of friendship and mutual ministry.

If that first attempt fails, bring along a person trusted by all parties in the conflict. If that fails, try again. Sometimes the

pain is too deep and the narrative of what transpired too knotty to untangle. Sometimes people exclude themselves from the community. Sometimes it is necessary to ask someone to step away from a group in which they have been disruptive. Rarely, it does become necessary to bar someone from the congregation. Never do we brush one hand against the other, happy to be done with that person. They remain people for whom we have compassion and with whom we yearn for reconciliation.