

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

RESURRECTED RELATIONSHIPS

Matthew 18:15-20

16th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18)

Analysis by Timothy Hoyer

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

DIAGNOSIS: The Loss of Christ Means Death

Step One: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The Case of the Missing Member*

The church, which is a gathering of people to whom Christ has given mercy, has its members bound to each other by that very same mercy of Christ. The "sin" that Matthew refers to is more

than an action the Ten Commandments demands we should not do. It is more than dishonoring parents, hurting a neighbor, being unfaithful to a friend or a spouse, or saying something false about a neighbor. "Sin" is any action one does that takes away the mercy of Christ from someone else in the church. Or it is an action that replaces the mercy of Christ that binds the members of the church to one another and ties them together with something else that is not Christ. Such an action is anything that makes another member feel unloved by Christ or unloved by other members. And such an action is anything that makes another member doubt that Christ's mercy is for them. When "sin" happens, Christ is no longer there among the two (v. 20).

Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Case of the Faith that Fled*

Christ has been lost from between the two, not just because of temper or jealousy or being in a rush or not taking the time to think. Christ was intentionally abandoned. Christ was no longer trusted to be the cement that held the two members together. Christ was not used as the way for the two people to relate to each other. When Christ is not used or trusted as the bond between two people, they are left bound to each other by the bonds of the law, such as acting only if one benefits by it or the action is mutually beneficial; such as by having common interests; by contracts, tolerance, requirements of being the same age, same ethnic group, or having respect. Those are all good benefits. But if one fails to fulfill those benefits, or fails to meet those requirements, then one is judged as lacking, as not being worth having as a friend or neighbor.

Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Case of Damned by the Divine*

Not only has Christ been lost from between the two members, Christ has also been lost between us and God. That also leaves us being bound to God by the law. What we are bound to on earth

also binds us in heaven (v. 18). God uses the law to accuse us of not trusting Christ. God uses the law to condemn us for not trusting Christ. God uses the law for the third time to put us to death: "The soul that sins shall die." We are treated as if we were a Gentile and a tax collector (v. 17).

PROGNOSIS: The Regaining of Christ Results in Resurrection

Step Four: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Christ's Victory Is the Verdict*

Since we have sinned against God, God goes to us and points out the fault when God and we are alone (v. 15). But God goes to us in Christ, who acts towards those who sin in a new way. Christ comes to take our place. He becomes the one accused in our place. He becomes the one condemned in our place. And he becomes the one who is put to death on a cross in our place. By his death, Christ fulfills the law's demand that the soul that sins shall die. Christ did not throw away any of the law, but fulfilled it. He did not lessen its demands, or twist its truthful accusations. Christ fulfilled the law. Then God raised Christ from the dead. God had mercy on Christ who sacrificed himself for those who did not trust him. God loosed Jesus from God's own accusation, condemnation, and death.

Step Five: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Faith Frees Jesus' Followers*

When we hear that Christ has died for us, and that for his sake God has mercy on us, we are regained (v. 15) by God. In other words, God binds us to himself using Christ. God binds us to himself with bonds of mercy. Those who trust Christ, who follow him, are freed from God's accusation of not trusting Christ, are freed from God's condemnation, and freed from God's putting them to death. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Faith in Christ, because it is faith in Christ, is why

God declares us and reckons us to be righteous. No longer is the law used as the way God relates to us. God relates to us through Christ, and Christ is the way of mercy and regaining.

Step Six: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Many Offers of the Means of Mercy*

To bring Christ back between the members of the church, where one has “sinned” against the other, the person sinned against offers the sinner the mercy of Christ. That person points out how Christ is not being used between them, that the law is being used instead. But if the sin is to have been made to doubt Christ, it is very hard to offer Christ. Thus, to bring two others who have trust in Christ to the one who is relating to others through the law is good because they have faith in Christ and have his mercy to give to both members. And if two members’ offer of Christ is not enough, then the whole church is to gather around the two and use Christ to bring mercy between the two. Everyone in the church, each member, is an offer of Christ to the two who have sin between them. All present say that Christ is the only way they relate to one another. Christ alone is the way of mercy between members and between members and God. Christ alone rules among them and not sin. It is an offer of mercy. If the person who trusts the law still refuses to hear and be regained, then that person becomes an outsider (a Gentile and a tax collector (v. 17)). The person is shown the law’s force of accusation and condemnation and death so that the offer of Christ’s mercy is needed. For Christ eats with Gentiles and tax collectors. Christ died for Gentiles and tax collectors. He has regained us to God.