

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

THE HOLY CROSS

Matthew 18:15-20

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

18:15 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: A Broken, Sinful Body

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Divided, Broken, "Sinful"*

As a social entity the Church has always been divided. Her confessional unity ("one holy Church") masks divisions (see Luke 22:24-34, Acts 15, Gal. 2) that flare up again and again. Such divisions reflect both cultural and theological divides, and her suffering is provoked by her often counter-cultural faith. The

Church's brokenness is omnipresent. The "sins" among Church members (vv. 15-17) is thus no anomaly! The dramas and the psycho-dramas within the one Body are endless, so that the Holy Spirit seems to be divided against itself! Divided missions, Church sanctioned wars, and great schisms within are stark evidence that the one Body, from the very beginning, is a broken Body. The struggle for power, especially when it is used to ensure orthodoxy, is both insidious and seductive. The priesthood and its inevitable consequence, the papacy (and with it the Constantinian arrangement), was flawed from the outset, spawning even greater "sins" against the Body. Ecumenism, despite its achievements, is powerless against the brokenness that is inherent in the Church. And yet the scandal of a divided, broken, sinful Body, however much it may be scandalous to us and to our neighbors, has not prevented the continuing work of Christ (Matt. 18:18-20).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : "Other" Gospels

From the beginning, there have been contenders in the Body alongside faith in Christ: "other" gospels (Gal. 1:6; see 1 Cor. 1:12-18), "other" Christ-confessions (both legalistic and antinomian), competing narratives of the gospel (Matt., Mark, Luke, John) and a plethora of Gnostic gospels. Testaments were written and established. Creeds were voted on and codified. What were once variations on the faith quickly became heretical; and heretics, like the prophets, were murdered. From the very beginning, some among Jesus' disciples "doubted" while others "worshiped" him (Matt. 20:17; see Matt. 13:29-30). Any exegetical or actual attempt to separate out the doubters from the worshipers, or the weeds from the wheat, is guilty of hypocrisy and of preempting the judgment of God. The truth is that everyone, even (or especially) the faithful, are also doubters (see 1 Pet. 4:17). Most notably, the resurrected Jesus "authorized" even the doubters the task of being his Body for

the world (Matt. 20:18-20).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : “Bound” Over To Death

The problem is not that the Church has been given authority to “bind” (retain) and to “loose” (forgive) sins in the name of Jesus (vv. 18-19), but that the Church assumes the mantle of the Holy Spirit by binding and loosing in the Church’s own name. The Church may suffer for the faith, but confuses her own wounds with those of the Crucified. She deifies herself in order to avoid crucifixion by the world, that is, to avoid being bound together with the Crucified. Because she thus shares in the sinfulness of all humanity, undeniably and overwhelmingly and paradigmatically, she is “bound” unto death by the very God who called her into existence. All her divisions and sufferings and brokenness, her “crucifixion” as it were (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 6:17; 2 Cor. 4:10-12), are reminders that even she, in her sinfulness, is bound for eternal destruction.

PROGNOSIS: Broken Yet Forgiven

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Broken For Us

Jesus, the Son of God, identified himself with our brokenness and sinfulness, and suffered its consequences (Matt. 26:26-28). He was bound and removed from us, killed by us and for us. Nonetheless, Jesus forgives us! His crucifixion establishes that (Matt. 27:51-54). Jesus’ Father therefore raised him from the dead as an eternal witness not only to the reality of our sin but to its forgiveness for all time: past, present, and future. Without having killed Jesus we could never have confronted the full horror of our sin; and without his resurrection, we could never be forgiven by him.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : In the Name of Christ

Jesus’ forgiveness carries with it a promise: “Where two or

three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (v. 20). Where Christ is, there is forgiveness. The promise is given not only to the Church, but to everyone who trusts in Christ (v. 15).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Holy Cross*

Everyone who trusts in Christ, that is, in his promise of forgiveness, is a forgiven sinner. On that basis, Christ-trusters not only proclaim Christ (ministry of the Word) but embody him in and for the world. Yet not without being crucified by the world, for that is how Christ is "present" in the world (v. 20). Luther called this ministry "bearing the Holy Cross." Our own resurrection is just a matter of time. Thus, Christ-trusters do what Christ does; or rather, Christ himself does these ministries through us. When we forgive others (or reconcile with one who has harmed us), it is the same as Christ forgiving them. When we, in our brokenness, bind the wounds of others, it is the same as Christ binding their wounds. For in so doing, we are the Body of Christ!