

## What Is the Sign?

This morning we're picking back up where we left off a couple weeks ago with the lectionary readings. Three weeks ago we heard how God had spoken to Moses from the bush – which didn't burn up. In today's passage, He's preparing to lead the ancient Israelites out of Egypt, and institutes the first Passover. To people unfamiliar with the stories in the Bible, that episode can sound pretty grim. Why would a good God punish the Egyptian people for the wickedness of Pharaoh, their king?

To understand that, we have to understand history, and the way people used to think. The Egyptians believed that Pharaoh was a living god – and Pharaoh was quite happy to have the Egyptian people believe that! So what we have is a spiritual war that bleeds over into the physical realm between the True God, and a false god – or idol, embodied by Pharaoh, King of Egypt. In the passage Joetta read for us, the Israelites were told to kill and eat lambs – and to paint the door-frames of their houses with the lamb's blood. This was to be the sign for the angel of death to not harm the Israelites.

Those houses without lamb's blood on the door-frame were visited that night by the angel of death and the firstborn throughout the land of Egypt were killed. I'm sure, given how people are, that there were probably some Israelite families in that country who had a dead child in the morning, due to a lack of faith or a lack of follow through. It's sad to think about, but that's the reality of the situation. Hosea the prophet writes, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge!" (Hos. 4:6). When we accept Jesus Christ as Savior, He washes us in His blood – and then expects us to let Him be Lord of us, and do the hard, transformative work needed within through the presence of the Holy Spirit to bring us into alignment with the will of God. In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus talks to us about how we ought to relate to others. If you have a Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 18:15-20. **Read Matthew 18:15-20.**

### The Matthew 18 Principle

Jesus tells us, "If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one," (Matt. 18:15). Now, if you have a gut reaction of fear, dread, or hopelessness when you read this word from Jesus, please know that you are not alone. Let's be honest at the start – this passage has become its own bashing tool and a cover for a lot of sinful practices, structures, and further victimization of some of the beloved ones of God. To be brutally honest, it has allowed sin to continue in the family of faith.

I hope, if you're looking at your Bible with me, you see that there's a little letter partway through verse 15, with a notation that reads, "Other ancient authorities lack *against you*." The Bible we have today was gradually developed. It was written down on more than 5,000 manuscripts, most of which were fragmented. So some of these manuscripts, for verse 15, read, "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." You can see how dropping those particular words has the potential to turn this verse into a weapon to use against people!

When I read hard passages – for instance, like those we’re looking at today – and I start feeling fear, dread, or hopelessness, I ask myself, “What is the greater thing God is trying to do here? What does it reveal about the nature of God?” What we have here is a way to build and maintain relationships. Known as “the Matthew 18 Principle,” many Christian organizations – including church denominations – lay claim to this principle to resolve conflict.

The great thing God is doing here, is showing us that He doesn’t leave us alone in our sin, but puts us together with others who might be able to see what we cannot, about how we are living – people who are His agents of kindness and grace, who lead us to repentance. Jesus envisions people being able to stay together, and He recognizes that this will require risk-taking-truth-telling and a life-changing repentant attitude.

### **Repentance, Reconciliation, Restoration**

“But 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,” (verse 16), Jesus says next. Notice that every time the number of people involved escalates in this passage, God’s desire to see repentance and restoration to the community is clear. The good news we’re hearing in this today is that repentance and restoration is possible. God forms us into a community of accountability and support, and gives us the mechanisms of repentance, reconciliation, truth-telling, and reform as well as forgiveness. These practices allow people to turn from sin, back towards God and one another. They allow us to have healing from all kinds of wounds – those inflicted upon us, and those which we have inflicted on others. This is good news!

The context of these five verses in St. Matthew’s Gospel reinforces that message. Jesus has instructed His people to guard and self-discipline themselves so that they do not cause harm to “the little ones,” and He has talked about His willingness to go out and find the wayward ones. Next, He will tell a story about how important it is for His followers to keep practicing forgiveness – but – we’ll talk more about that next week! Like these other passages in the same setting, Jesus’ words here are not a procedure to be followed in each and every situation. Please hear me on that. Instead, they represent something much more – the identity, character, and way of the family of faith, together.

Jesus starts at the smallest level – one-on-one – with a person-honoring conversation that allows one to follow the Spirit’s invitation to repentance without being publicly shamed for a sin of which they are repenting. There are times an individual who has been harmed by another can safely have that sort of conversation with the one who has hurt them, and it leads to a strengthening of their relationship as the process of truth-telling, and listening, on both sides leads to restoration of relationship. But, there are other times, when this doesn’t happen, either. This is where church organizations have to be careful when they say they use “the Matthew 18 principle.”

### **One Caveat**

Perhaps the person who has been sinned against is not able to – or should not, due to power dynamics, safety, and so forth – be a part of this process. For example,

we wouldn't encourage a victim of sexual abuse to go alone and talk to the person who has preyed upon them, to seek an apology. Victims of crimes need to seek assistance from law enforcement against perpetrators, and to stay away from them so they aren't further harmed. Jesus isn't talking about fighting crime in Matthew 18. He's talking about the common sins most of us commit. Sins like gossiping, lying, idolatry, adultery – those sorts of things. Maybe the person who is sinning is so entrenched – we may even say “bound” by their sin, their patterns of behavior – that they can't handle the truth. Christ's intention persists all the same, and He instructs us to keep involved in each other's lives so we're repentant of those things we do which do not align with His will.

Trying to use this as a catch-all procedure is a misuse of the Gospel. The overall theme of this passage is the community's work to support the turn towards repentance by those who have done wrong. He keeps underscoring the opportunity for the person who's done wrong to make things right. Jesus was the one, after all, who was saying from the beginning of His ministry, “Repent! The kingdom of God is near!” (Matt. 4:17).

He says, “If that person 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,” (Matt. 18:17). The need for repentance remains, so Jesus tells us to broaden the circle of those coming around the sinner for accountability and as witnesses of what changed lives ought to look like. Out of our gratitude for God's goodness shown to us through the cross of Christ, we aren't supposed to give up on each other, and the community of faith becomes witnesses of whether we repent or not. Even when the sin becomes public, and widely-known among the whole church, God's intention is to see the offending member stay in the fold. But if the person refuses to listen to the witness of the family of faith, and that family is truly walking in the light of Christ, doing things His way – then the community's act of grace is to treat the person as though they were not yet a Christian.

### **Fragmentation of the Church**

The person has proven, by persistent unwillingness to repent, that he or she does not believe the basic truths about God and are like “a Gentile and a tax collector.” who still need to receive and believe the Good News. I just want to say this: in our society today, this almost never happens. The Church does not put people out of the Church. Put another way, we don't “excommunicate” folks. The reality is, that when their lifestyles, and their beliefs about God don't align with ours, they generally see themselves out. See, this is how we've ended up where we're at as a denomination. Folks stopped focusing on Christ glorified, and started preaching a different gospel focused on fear and speculation.

Our denomination is not alone in this. Every denomination in the United States – truly the Western half of Christendom – have gone through this, or are going through this. You may have heard this summer about the uproar in the Southern Baptist Church. They were fussing with each other over the ordination of women clergy, and decided to push Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in California out of their denomination because they have a woman pastor.

Matthew, who wrote the Gospel, was a tax collector before becoming a disciple, so even the idea of treating people “as Gentiles and tax collectors,” is seasoned with possibilities for the faithful Church. The Gentile and the tax collector can receive the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ, just as much as the Jews. Sometimes we have to let people go, to learn from their own mistakes. There are people out there who have to learn the truth for themselves. You can talk to them until you’re blue in the face, but they just won’t take your word for it – they have to see it for themselves. Eventually – we hope – they come to see themselves as God’s beloved children, who can come home and find grace and forgiveness already waiting for them.

### **Stay Focused on Jesus**

Jesus tells us, “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. Again, 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,” (verses 18-19). See, when there’s uproar in the Church, generally speaking, Christ expects us to continue the hard work of building up the beloved community. He expects us to sit down with those who see things differently than what we do, and let His light shine through us. God continually calls for us to “go and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” But we aren’t doing that very well if we look around the Table, and see only people who look like us looking back at us.

Jesus says, “For where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there among them,” (verse 20). It’s a sobering thought to have Jesus in our midst, witnessing to what we do, or do not do. The Church of Christ is one which is diverse, multi-colored, and filled with people relying on the Holy Spirit to change them into the people He envisioned them to be before they were conceived. There is so much that needs to be said in regards to the complexly sinful Church, generally speaking, in which we find ourselves – I have more to say on it, but you wouldn’t be able to handle it, and we don’t have the time to go deep into it – we all fall short of God’s glory. Focusing on the sinfulness of people, rather than on the good thing God is doing through all of us because of Jesus Christ, is basically what the religious people of Jesus’ day were doing. There are a lot of Christians yet today doing this same thing.

Instead, we’re called to turn our eyes upon Jesus, and the great thing He’s done for us at the cross and empty tomb. He continues to do great things for us even now, at the right hand of the Father. Focusing on Him allows us to re-center ourselves as His beloved community, and lines us up to focus on things that matter most. It’s why we commit to doing the hard thing, of telling the truth to one another about our sins. Some church traditions would call this confession. We have to be open and honest with ourselves, and with others about our struggles. If we aren’t, will we really know and proclaim the transforming grace of our Triune God?

**Prayer:** Holy God, You call us to righteousness and light. Teach us the undivided law of love, that we may love Your children even as You do, love You with all our will and strength, and find our freedom in this blessed service, taught to us in word and deed by Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.