

13th Sunday after Pentecost
"Where Two or Three are Gathered"
Matthew 18:15-20

There's a story about a man who served as the head usher at his church. And every Sunday he was in charge of going up to the balcony and counting how many people had attended that service.

Well one Sunday, as he was coming down from the balcony another usher heard him quietly whispering the number he had counted. But when he recorded the number on the attendance register he noticed that he had added one more to the total. The fact is, he did that every Sunday.

It was one small way he reminded himself of Jesus promise:
"Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

These words of Jesus from today's Gospel are remarkable. But they are remarkable not in the way we usually think about them.

Don't we usually hear this verse when we're at a gathering at church and not as many people are showing up as we had expected. And so someone nervously says, "Well, wherever two or three are gathered." But that's not what this verse is really about.

What is remarkable, about this passage, is the fact that it comes right in the middle of a teaching about church conflict. And right before a parable about forgiveness.

In today's Gospel Jesus teaches us one of the most important, but often neglected ways to maintain unity in a church.

Over the years I've served as a pastor I've seen many times when conflict arises between individuals in the church. And yet I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen a member go privately to another member, speak the truth in love, and try for reconciliation.

Too often, our usual way to treat conflict in the church is to ignore it or tell someone else about it. Wounds are swallowed. Sometimes cruelty goes unchecked.

If you ask why we tend to ignore wrongs, perhaps we would say, "we don't want to make a big deal out of it."

But in reality, what we're doing is trying to handle our problems without Jesus.

On the surface, everything is kept superficial and polite. And that's okay for a start. It's certainly better to be polite than to be at each other's throats.

But that's not enough.

Today's Gospel comes from a church which was convinced that division in the church is deadly,

- that rifts between Christians are a serious matter
- that reconciliation is too important to be left to chance

So, Matthew 18, doesn't leave things to chance.

Instead it gives us specific, practical, step-by-step directions to achieve reconciliation.

Think for a moment about the worst thing that someone has done to you.

Think about how unjust it was, how much it hurt.

Now, if you haven't already, imagine yourself forgiving the person who wronged you.

It's tough to forgive, isn't it?

And yet that is exactly what Jesus commands us to do here.

We are not told to forgive if we feel like it.

We are not told to merely give it a try.

Instead, Jesus instructs us to **pursue** reconciliation.

In Romans 12, Paul says, "As far as it depends on you, live in peace with everyone."

Now in some cases, we will be rejected,

and the offender may even refuse to listen to others in the church.

But let's start here with ourselves.

Often we don't even try, because honestly we don't want reconciliation.

We are hurt and we doubt reconciliation is even possible.

How is it possible, we ask?

It's possible, only for those who know what it's like to be forgiven.

All of this practical advice on handling conflict between Christians occurs in a very specific context. It only makes sense in the context of God's forgiveness of you and me.

Without Jesus, our sin is a debt we can't repay.

Without Jesus, our books are in the red, as deep as the United States Treasury.

And yet when we are forgiven... we are **changed**.

As Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come."¹

¹ 2nd Cor. 5:17

With our own debt cancelled Christ moves within us to forgive the debt of others.
The one who has experienced forgiveness is the one best able to forgive.

I heard a story about a Midwestern congregation that split apart over an unfortunate business incident between two of its most active families. Pretty soon members and friends of one family began to sit on one side of the congregation during Sunday worship, and members and friends of the other family sat on the other side.

In that congregation it had been the custom to celebrate Holy Communion on the first Sunday of every month. So when the next Communion Sunday arrived, the pastor moved through the first part of the service, then, when it came time to invite people to the Lord's table, the pastor looked out and saw a divided, hostile congregation before him.

"Wait," he said, "We are not ready to celebrate this meal. It would be a travesty, a clear violation of Scripture to come to this table when there is so much hostility between us."

The next Communion Sunday came and everyone was still sitting on opposite sides, just as divided as before. Maybe they thought the pastor wasn't serious.

But again he told them, "Until you reconcile with one another, we are not ready to gather around this table. I won't pretend there is peace, when there is no peace."

God is calling you to speak the truth to one another in love.
And so time passed.

The congregation did not celebrate the sacrament for nearly **six months**. After six months, there was a dramatic Sunday when representatives from each group confessed their sin, and asked for forgiveness. That Sunday, when the congregation moved to the Lord's Table with tears, everyone said that Christ was present as never before. They had become a church the kind of church God calls us to be.

What is remarkable about that story and what is remarkable about today's Gospel... is Jesus' promise, "Wherever two or three are gathered, I am there among them"

Jesus promise is not a general statement about being present when you can count two or three people. Rather, Jesus tells us very specifically, that when we face conflict there is **hope** because He is with us, not standing on the sidelines, but right there among us.

In the face of our worst enemy, in the face of the greatest wrong committed against us... Jesus is present and gives us his power to forgive.
May God give you strength to talk to those who have offended you,
and the grace to forgive as we have first been forgiven. Amen