**Matthew 18 15-20**

**15**“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. **16**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. **17**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. **18**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. **19**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. **20**For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Let Us Pray

*God our hope, you call us by name. May we be rooted in the faith of Jesus. Give us the strength and courage to share your healing, touching grace among our neighbours, that we and they may know the fullness of your reign of love. With Jesus we pray.
Amen.*

On a chronological note, this passage from Matthew was written a long time ago, around 70 – 80 AD. It is plausible that it was specifically intended as wise counsel for a small Jewish community, living in a hostile environment. The text reads like a legal manual of how to deal with someone else’s sin, and what steps to take before ex-communicating someone. The cut and dried character of the reading can leave us somewhat uncomfortable. In the confines of a small village with only one church the punishment of being outcast can be socially very harsh. It is not something I would enjoy talking about on a Sunday morning, but the passage deserves a reading.

In those days, becoming a Christian in such times for a Jewish person, and coming to terms with the belief that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah, must have been quite an ordeal. Social judgement from the community can undermine one’s morale, intimidating Christians to such a degree that they would have required some encouragement to keep them on the right track at the time.

In this important time between Jesus’ public ministry and the journey to the cross, Matthew recorded Jesus’ teaching about how we ought to behave.

At first glance, it might seem a bit trivial, because in just a few short chapters our hearts will begin racing as the story of the crucifixion unfolded. But for now, Matthew has recorded Jesus in one of his profound advisory capacities, which, to put it politely, was beginning to sound a bit like a dear Abbey column.

Jesus abhorred all aspects of such anger. Instead, he talked about how to care for someone. Forgiveness and restoration were the topics of the day where it was made clear that forgiveness cannot be calculated, and God does not keep a scorecard of rights and wrongs. Consequently, neither should we. So it would seem that the lesson is quite clear that if God forgives us so freely, then we who are the forgiven could evidence our reception of forgiveness, by showing some gratitude in forgiving others.

The point Jesus was making was that when we are the injured party, we are to seek out the person who we think has done the injuring and initiate reconciliation. On the point of self-interest, we should not nurse our grudges, whine about our wounds, or to resist efforts at healing that can weaken the initiative that Jesus suggested. We are to take the first step, to risk the engagement that can lead to a restored relationship. But of course, this is easier said than done.

Situations of alienation are to be viewed very seriously. Just glossing over, or overlooking the matter, or not talking about it, will not always make the matter go away. Sadly, forgiveness never happens by default, but It can occur in the risky encounter between two alienated parties.

On the side of caution, this threefold process of dealing with an alienated party outlined in Matthew 18, may not always be an advisable process to follow today. It acknowledges the reality that not every participant will immediately own up to or take responsibility for the estrangement between the parties involved.

In the establishment of this elaborate process, the first step comes in the face-to-face encounter of the two people. Basically, in a nutshell, whoever has fallen by the wayside, you keep talking. It could be someone at work, a church or family member, neighbour or whatever. The first option is a one-on-one conversation in which much can be resolved. The text here makes no effort to advise on the personal exchange, or to indicate what words must be spoken or deeds must be done to effect a reconciliation. In this advisory capacity, there is a certain reticence to go beyond the verb listen, because every such encounter has its own peculiar dynamics.

The atmosphere can be intense because personal stakes can be high, with pride at the forefront. What is frustrating is that no rules are drawn up to advise what can or should take place. But how do we do this out of love, rather than retaliation? Perhaps, this passage steers away from conflict management, towards a call for Jesus’ kind of discipleship.

On the bright side, if you are listened to and the issue has been resolved, you have regained a brother or sister, friend or colleague, or whoever.

However, if by taking the initiative, this personal approach is rebuffed, resulting in no progress, quite often, discerning whether or not one has been harmed, and then determining a resolution is not something either an offender, or the offended party can do alone. A second option or step is to take along a person or persons that they respect, but you keep talking. Be aware that in the process of reconciliation, you might yourself be shown to not be completely innocent in the matter, and sometimes a resolution can clear up a misunderstanding, or result in the share of some of the blame.

Then we must have the mental and moral fortitude to move on because our Christian community has a stake in brokenness and reconciliation – not only in the liturgical declaration of a pardon every week that we come to church, but in the actual relationships among its members. Equally, that includes relationships between families, friends and colleagues.

The church has a mandate of forgiveness for any alienated parties, and is keen to join in at anytime in the wish for resolution. We are reminded of Jesus’ sermon on the mount, where, before we leave our gift at the altar, we should first reconcile with a brother or sister who has something against you, and then leave your gift at the altar.

Jesus didn’t choose rich and powerful influencers for his work. He chose ordinary flawed people, people who recognise they make mistakes, people like Peter the Fisherman, people like us. We inherit a challenge to give attention to small matters, of life. It’s a long step but necessary o prevent the progressive destruction and dislocation of a community. We have a pastoral challenge to think small enough to confront each other in private, to alleviate any discord that might strangle the growth of our families, professions or congregations.

This morning Matthew has given us this pastoral challenge to think kindly enough to chase down that lost sheep, in such a way as not to damage the larger group, whether it be family, profession or even our congregation.

Interestingly, in this reading, Matthew has reiterated the statement made when Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. Again, he said to us, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven, the power granted to Jesus’ apostles is significant and therefore must be used wisely, and with love”.

Amen