

# Sermon: Pentecost XIII: Proper 18

The Rev. Mike Wernick

September 7, 2014

Year A  
Ezekiel 33:7–11  
Psalm 119:33–40  
Romans 13:8–14  
Matthew 18:15–20

Today's texts are the kind of texts clergy hope that someone else will preach on... they'd be better heard... I think... if we discussed them over a beer or two... not to achieve the drunkenness that Paul condemns... but to soften our independence... our rugged American individualism... to open us up to each other's heart... to the connections we share... and know that what we feel in those moments... is more real... and more lasting... than our own self-assertiveness and bravado...

By now... we all know that *repent*... means to turn back... maybe from false gods... but certainly from division and accusation... maybe from one's evil ways... but certainly towards the One True God... to God's ways... even to the mind of Christ... today's text from Ezekiel certainly echoes this... and Paul's letter to the Romans... about embracing this love... about waking up... and about about putting on the armor of light... anticipates what was written in Matthew... years later... about reconciliation...

And so I want to say that I'm sorry for any time I've sinned against any of you... when I've said something too off the cuff... before thinking... or done something without realizing how it might have been received... or who it might have affected... I apologize for what I may or may not have done... that has diminished relationship... because the Gospel calls us to preserve relationship... at what seems like any cost...

*If a member of the community sins against you...* if you feel offended... by harsh words or insensitive actions... it's your responsibility to initiate the reconciliation... go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone...

But what do we usually do when someone points out one of our faults... we dig our heels in and enter defense mode... ready to recount the situation in a precise chronological play-by-play... who said what when... complete with *tone of voice* and *roll of eyes*... and point out why the problem's *their problem*... and not ours...

And then if two or three people show up... intervention style... to point out our faults... then it's all ratcheted up to the next level... we're betrayed... the offended person has broken some kind of confidence... has pulled people into something that's quite frankly none of their business... we think to ourselves... or maybe even say out loud with righteous indignation... HOW DARE YOU?! Why... I won't even give you the satisfaction of talking about it now... I was going to... but now... no way...

And then... if it's brought to the whole church... if during announcements... one person stands up and shares what someone else said... or did... how that other person sinned... we'd wonder... did Jesus really mean this... didn't he know how mortified we'd feel... how that would be just too much to bear... how if that happened... we might just have to find another church home...

It's almost impossible for us to hear these instructions for reconciliation... without framing them in our modern legal system... the Empire which asserts itself around us refuses accidents... favors the victim... the offended... but the justice it seeks against the offender is more like an eye for an eye... it talks about getting the upper hand... making them pay... getting even... teaching them a lesson they'll never forget...

The Kingdom which Jesus offers favors the offender... but we go to the offender... not to make them wrong... or lord ourselves over them... but to be reconciled... we go to the offender seeking unity... not division... we go to the offender hoping to help them put on the armor of light... to enlighten them... we go to the offender because we are all members of the body of Christ... and one part cannot say to another... I have no need of you...

There will be conflict in intimate relationships... like in my first and second marriage... when I deal with businesses sometimes... there are confrontations about what was expected and what was received... there's even conflict on the highway...

But church... church is the place where we love each other... there's no place for conflict at church... is there... but the early church was not a love fest... there were some real conflicts that had to be worked out... and it took a long time... I mean... it's taking a long time...

And so if church is the place... the one and only place... where we learn to put the Gospel into practice... there will be conflict... we ought to expect it... and be surprised not when there's conflict... but when there's none...

But we don't generally do conflict very well... do we... most Christians... most people... have learned to avoid negative emotions... when I took CPE during seminary... Clinical Pastoral Education... the simple definition of confrontation given to us... was: sharing one's "experience of someone"... with them... so if 1 person out of 100 shares with me that I'm insulting... I can hear them... and thank them... and move on... but if 99 out of 100 people share with me that I'm insulting... maybe I need to consider that differently...

But we're so used to the legalism of Empire... and self-righteous forms of Christianity... and the rapid-fire machine gun damage they can inflict... that as confrontation becomes increasingly public... we can become increasingly vulnerable... and defensive... and just shut down... to what someone else might say...

What we need instead... is the grace and openness of Kingdom... to be vulnerable enough to hear the experiences of others who speak *their* truth... and to trust that those who may shine a light on the splinter in our eye... do so with God's love... and not to seek their own gain... their own advantage... that they do so... to seek reconciliation and not to make us wrong...

There's a question I learned in marriage therapy... would you rather be right... or would you rather be in relationship... and this is what we so easily miss I think... whoever wrote Matthew was resisting Empire too... was more concerned with relationship and reconciliation than with being right... was so concerned... that even when bringing this unnamed sin before the whole church... and the offender refuses to listen... Jesus said: *let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector*... this didn't mean a dirty... no good... foreigner and collaborator... to be discarded... it meant someone to be pursued with even more vigor... remember... there are no lost sheep...

So be brave... when you feel offended... and go to this other person... this offender... and begin a sentence with "I feel..."... no one can make you wrong... because feelings aren't right or wrong... they just are... but be clear... we don't do this to get what we want... we do this to feel and be heard... and to remove the emotional and spiritual barrier that's come between us... because when it really comes down to it... we all need to be heard... we at least need to know that others have tried to empathize with our feelings...

And there's an important distinction... acknowledging that someone feels offended... is not the same as admitting that we have made them feel this way... it may seem like semantics... but there's a critical difference... and it has to do with taking responsibility for one's own feelings... because if I can make someone feel something... anything... then I'm going to make weapons manufacturers feel remorse for what they've been producing and stop production... I'm going to make certain religious leaders feel regret for the divisive comments they've made and seek unity... I'm going to make every company in the world feel compelled to protect the environment and cease all forms of pollution... but God did not give me that much authority... what God did... is give each one of us free will... So let's pay attention to what Jesus is and isn't saying... he's not talking about who's right or wrong... he's not even talking about who gets their way... his focus is reconciliation... plain and simple... his focus is on repairing relationships broken by sin... his focus is human connection... on the body of Christ remaining

connected... some people may still choose to move on... we can't make anyone stay... but moving on doesn't necessarily mean they're out of community... they may just be part of a different community... but the hope is... the certainty is... that even when we agree to disagree... if we do what we can to seek and effect reconciliation... there's still room enough at Table... there's still room enough in the Kingdom... and there's still room enough in God's heart... for all of us...