

I recognize that these texts may not strike you as THE texts a preacher might select for her first Sunday at a new church. And, I confess, dealing with conflict, forgiveness, and throwing people into prison were not the first places I wanted to go with you, but these are two of the texts from the Lectionary Readings—PAUSE to explain—and it is my experience that God gives us the texts we *need*, whether or not they are the texts we *want*.

One thing you should know about me as a preacher is that I weave in and out of the given texts, so I invite you to open up the pew bibles to the Matthew passage, keep them open, and follow along. I also invite you to bring your own bible and make notes in the margin. I am a firm believer that bibles are only as helpful as you make them. So write down your insights, your struggles, your questions.

And talk to me about those questions and struggles. Maybe not in the middle of worship, but during the week. One of the beautiful things about our scripture is that its interpretation is open for all of us. I have plenty of opinions and ideas, but I trust that you do as well. It is in the conversation, struggle, and questioning that scripture comes alive for all of us. So, consider this your invitation to, dare I say it, disagree with me. I have great faith that as this congregation engages in biblical reading and study together, all of us will find more connections with the text, more connections with each other, and more things with which we will struggle and grow. So, with that out of the way, let's look again at the Matthew passage. Chapter 18, vs 15-35.

Matthew's gospel, we should remember, is written to a congregation of Jews and gentiles. Remember that when Jesus was walking around town, talking to his disciples and followers, there wouldn't have been a “church”. Jesus never organized the First Presbyterian Church of Nazareth, because in his day, he and his followers were law abiding Jews. He spoke in the synagogue and he spoke on the mountain sides, but to our knowledge, he never convened a committee meeting or ate a casserole at a potluck. The development of “church” didn't happen until after the crucifixion and resurrection, when his followers came together to keep alive the things they had seen and heard. And this text shows that some concept of “church” has developed since the days of Jesus.

To complicate matters, the word that is translated as “church” in this passage is the word “ecclesia”, which means “called out of”. It was a term from Greek politics. It was the name of the assembly of citizens who came together to vote for magistrates, to declare war, to do the work of the government. So, early on, what we now call the church took its name from the idea that people who came together could effect change. An ecclesia is a group of people who make a difference in their world by working together. There were plenty of other words that could have been used to describe a religious gathering, but the early church mothers and fathers picked this one.

For Jesus to call on the assembly, the ecclesia, is a sign that the church has never been about the building. It is about the people who are gathered together, who have been called out, who have a job to do.

Matthew, by including this in his narrative of Jesus' story, is addressing a need of his congregation, and of every congregation, namely—

**How are people supposed to get along?**

**What about this whole forgiveness thing?**

The Greek text really begins like this: “when a brother sins against you..” which means that Jesus doesn't even mess around with some notion of church perfection. Jesus

does not say, "now that you are in a church, I know you will all get along perfectly and all discord shall cease". What Jesus says is "when this happens".

This is big, people.

Often, we in American culture get disgusted with church because we think that all of those disputes that mess up our life shouldn't happen in church. I suspect you have heard something to the effect of "I stopped going to fill-in-the-blank church because people didn't always get along. And they call themselves Christians!"

You know you've heard it.

We know that Christians aren't immune to difficulty or strife, yet we want Christians to be perfect, and we want church to be perfect. And there is NO scriptural basis for that, whatsoever. All but one of Paul's letters that we have preserved in the Bible were written to congregations that were rent by disagreement and fighting.

Paul and Peter couldn't even be in the same room without disagreeing, according to Acts and to Paul's letters.

And here, Jesus says "when this happens".

But, as Christians, even though we can't be perfect, we are called to a different standard. There is a sense that by taking up our crosses and following him, as Carol preached about last week, that we are signing on for something different than the same old, same old.

So, the disagreements will happen. But the next part is where it gets tricky. At that point, Jesus says we're supposed to go talk with the person with whom we're in a disagreement.

**Really, Jesus? Can't I just moan and whine about that person to my husband and friends and then never actually talk with them about it, hoping it will all go away?**

No, he says.

**Can I send them an email or an anonymous letter?**

No, he says. Go talk to them. Face to face.

**But that's so hard!**

I know, he says. Take up your cross and follow me.

So, quite simply, our call in this text is to talk to each other, face to face. Giving each other the respect that each person deserves as a beloved child of God who has been called out to be part of the church.

I don't think Jesus wants to micromanage how those interactions take place because he doesn't list a lot of details. He'll let you figure out the best way to take care of it.

But I think it is worth noting that this passage about church discipline is in the midst of a larger passage about forgiveness and restoration. Church discipline is not about punishing people. It is about restoring them.

In verse 17, Jesus says, "If the brother or sister refuses to listen, 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 tax collector."

Now, those terms don't have the same "punch" today that they had 2,000 years ago, but imagine if Jesus said this. "let such a one be to you as a terrorist." On the surface, that sounds like excommunication. We don't want to hang out with gentiles and terrorists, do we?

But Jesus, in this gospel, and in others, has the bad habit of hanging out with the people with whom society tells him he shouldn't fraternize. Tax collectors, gentiles, lepers,

women. You name it. Jesus goes to their homes for dinner and invites them to hang out with him.

So, I think that when Jesus tells us to consider a person to be a tax collector or gentile, perhaps what he’s saying to us is this:

**Consider this person to be the biggest illustration you can imagine of someone in need of mercy, forgiveness and redemption.**

You don’t let them continue on in their troubling behavior, but you also don’t stop trying to bring them God’s mercy and love.

Look at verse 20 for a minute. When we are gathered together in God’s name, Christ is there with us. So, when we are together and are fighting over, oh, I don’t know....

The color for the new carpet.

The budget.

The style of music in worship.

Who we’re going to vote for in November.

When two or three of us are gathered together, disagreeing over who knows what, **God is there.** I hope you hear this as good news. *God is going to be with us until we can learn to get along.*

And then, Peter, perhaps trying to figure out how long it will take us to get along, asks Jesus, “how many times, Lord, should I forgive someone? As many as 7 times?” (Peter’s being a bit of a show off here. Who would expect someone to forgive someone seven times? It is just silly.)

And Jesus, to make sure we get that forgiveness is about redemption and restoration, says, “no Peter, not 7 times. but seventy seven times.” Jesus throws out numbers that are so big that the message is this—*forgiveness can’t be quantified.* As much as we think that “3 strikes” laws make sense in our criminal justice system, it isn’t how the church works. We are supposed to stay together, to keep working at this, until we get along. And when that happens, and there are moments it does, glimpses of the kingdom perhaps, listen to Jesus’ words from verse 18. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my father in heaven.”

That’s the reason we go and talk to each other face to face—because if or when we can come together, we don’t just change things on earth, we change them in heaven. So, we keep working at it, 70 times 7 times, because it is that important to us and to God.

And then we have the parable that the kids so dramatically acted out for us earlier this morning. The first slave, who owed more money than he could possibly ever repay in 100,000 lifetimes, doesn’t seem to recognize the gift he’s been given. He could never have paid that debt, but the minute he walks out the door with the debt erased, he starts looking for justice from his fellow slave. We read this story and think, silly man. How could he not see it?

**But when have we not seen the gift?** When have we demanded something from our friends and family that we haven’t been able to do ourselves?

So, how does Jesus answer Matthew’s questions about how do we get along? We remember that when God first forgave us, it wasn’t because we’d earned it. It was about MERCY. Our relationship with God through Jesus Christ isn’t available to us because we deserve it, or because we’ve earned it. It is a gift. Every day, a gift. Let us accept that gift in our own lives, see it in the lives of others, and invite them to see it in their own lives. Amen