

Today we're beginning a four-week sermon series entitled, "Learning to Love Our Enemies." Though it seems easier said than done, loving the unlovable is possible with God's help. I say it most every time I preach. Context in scripture is very important, and the context in which Matthew places today's text is most important. In Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives the disciples some practices that are essential for sustaining healthy Christian communities. Many of these practices have to do with honoring the "little ones" among us- those who have the least power within a community such as children. It is no accident that right before today's story, Jesus not only mentions children but also the parable of the lost sheep, which is why I included it in today's text. This familiar parable is also found in Luke's Gospel. However, different contexts. In Luke, the parable is a story of about the extravagant, even wasteful grace of God. But in Matthew, it is about how we are to treat one another as the Body of Christ (Rolf Jacobson, workingpreacher.org). In Matthew Jesus offers some advice on confronting another who sins against you, keeping in mind the least of these. Let's turn to God's Word for us today but first, let us **PRAY. READ.**

This week after reading through this text, my preaching colleague said, "I don't like this text. I don't like it because people in the church have misused it. It is not a policy manual for church discipline. People have been hurt by misinterpretations of this text and that is the opposite of what Jesus is intending here" (Beth Hoskins). Lutheran preacher, Nadia Bolz-Weber, agrees with my colleague. She says, "This passage makes me twitchy for several reasons. One: Jesus is talking about how to treat

someone who has sinned against you but instead it's been used for how to alienate someone who the nice people think is a sinner and that's different. Two: I wish like hell that Jesus had said, 'If someone has sinned against you, then go talk smack about them to a few other people before posting a thinly veiled remark about it on Facebook or Instagram.' But he didn't, so now I have to go and repent. Three: Jesus is giving instructions for what to do if someone in the church sins against you, and I can imagine this being used as an excuse to not take responsibility for our own feelings. And four: I just don't trust us to get this kind of thing right. I have a hard time trusting myself to be clear of my own self-interest and emotional triggers enough to not get this kind of thing wrong" (*A Sermon on Who to Trust- Us, or Jesus*, 9.8.14). No authority designated to the church scares me more than the authority to bind or to loose. And yet, sometimes with God's help, love must bind what is destructive. Sometimes, with God's help, love must loose what has been held captive by hurt, shame, resentment, or failure.

To be clear: "Jesus is not handing the church a timeless conflict resolution manual, however much we might long for one. Jesus gives the church not a ministry of punishment, but a ministry of repair. Jesus describes what life looks like in a community committed to protecting the vulnerable, telling the truth, and pursuing reconciliation" (Timothy Adkins-Jones, *The Christian Century*). Truth without vengeance. I want to be clear here as well. "Telling the truth in love" is not an excuse to say anything you desire. No. "Telling the truth in love" is not meant to be humiliating or shaming. It is meant to bring about awareness and

reconciliation- not isolate someone from the community. This text is NOT a tool to eviscerate or deny communion to anyone. Absolutely not! Last time I checked, none of us have escaped sinfulness. We are all sinners in desperate need of God's forgiveness and grace. "This passage imagines a church courageous enough to tell the truth and compassionate enough to prioritize reconciliation" (Adkins-Jones). The reality is that where there are people, there is sin and conflict, and Jesus knew it. Many of us do everything in our power to avoid conflict and confrontation. I was taught that if I didn't have anything nice to say, not to say anything at all. Some of the people who hurt or betray us, in our minds and hearts, are dead to us, yet some may not even be aware that they have hurt us. It's human nature to avoid conflict and confrontation because it can feel exhausting and scary. The phrase, "We need to talk," makes our stomach do flips because we know it means that something is broken between us, and we need to sort it out but are we willing to do the work? Social media has become one of the primary ways some of us handle conflict, and it is rarely, if ever, a healthy model. "People talk more *about* one another than they talk *with* one another" (Audrey West, workingpreacher.org). Just as writing someone a letter feels like a dying art so does having difficult face-to-face conversations feel close to extinction. Meanwhile conflicts continue to brew and fester and to further complicate matters, we're living in a time of major polarization, hostility, and conflict.

Conflict was present in the early church, just as it is today. It's still much easier to shun people than it is to listen, confront, and hold one another

accountable for our words and actions. What's wild is how much energy and work we put into avoiding confrontation yet, Jesus seems to expect and welcome it. "The question is not *whether* we'll wound each other with our words and actions, but *how* we should proceed when we do" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). In this text Jesus offers us a radically different path in dealing with conflict: a path that encourages the church to have honest face-to-face dialogue and not to keep silent with behavior that harms others. A path where confrontation is a necessary companion on the road to reconciliation. Jesus "tells us plainly that the way we conduct relationships here and now has direct consequences for God's coming kingdom: '*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*' (v. 18)" (Thomas). The end goal here isn't punishment or blame. The end goal is reconciliation- a family reunion- not retribution. Repair not more brokenness. Reconciliation involves relationships being restored, particularly by both parties both of whom stand condemned and forgiven at the cross and are willing to work together with the Holy Spirit in the restoration. How does the commandment to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves inform our handling of disagreement and division? Jesus wants us to try and regain a sibling in Christ. A pastoral moment here: "This formula shouldn't be weaponized to excuse abuse, discrimination, or exploitation. We wouldn't instruct survivors to confront those who have harmed them privately before seeking support from others. We wouldn't share sensitive information with the whole congregation simply because a disagreement wasn't resolved in steps one and two. We wouldn't vote people out of the church after all three

steps failed. No, we would, like Jesus, focus our attention on the vulnerable, the forgotten, the ones most likely to be overlooked. We'd drop the three steps and search for a process that protects the most vulnerable" (Adkins-Jones).

Some Christians have misinterpreted treating others like a Gentile or a tax collector to mean excommunicating or exiling the individual. Gentiles and tax collectors were seen as outsiders; however, in Matthew's Gospel we're shown over and over again how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors, of which Matthew was one- with love and forgiveness. All of this to reiterate that the goal here is to repair and bring these relatives back into the fold. This doesn't mean that we aren't to hold other disciples accountable for their hurtful behavior because we are; however, we speak the truth in acts of love- as Jesus does- and extend the invitation of reconciliation. Also just because you confront a sibling in Christ, it doesn't mean they're your enemy; they could be your neighbor. But that begs the question: Is your enemy also your neighbor? Imagine if a fellow believer is your enemy and you're hearing Jesus say you need to go to them and confront them. Now "we are getting at what is perhaps most scandalous about the gospel: that the enemy, the one who does not love you, the one who hates you- this one is to be valued equally with one's family members. Instead of an exclusive love, which declares, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,' Jesus commands an inclusive love, which declares, 'Love your enemies' (*Mere Christianity*, Lee Camp). As followers of Christ, we're called to practice "reconciliation rather than estrangement, love rather than hatred,

forgiveness rather than prejudice, inclusivity rather than exclusivity” (Camp). Some years ago I participated in a small group as a young pastor. I’m embarrassed to admit that I did not show up very Christ like. There was a man in the group who talked incessantly and who believed differently from me about several things. He went on and on about what he thought and was quoting from Scripture out of context- all over the place. I had had enough, and I let it be known. I was not kind. After the group was over, he approached me and told me how my words had hurt him. I wish I could tell you that I was the model Christian and listened to him without becoming defensive, but I didn’t at first. It was hard for me to hear and digest his words. I really wrestled with what he said to me . During worship that evening we participated in Communion. I wrestled with myself and through much prayer, time, and perspective, I heard him, but I could’ve done without him serving me Christ’s body. I was wrong for how I had treated him, and I began to cry as he told me, “This is Christ’s body given for you.” Looking back, I realize that he spoke his truth to me in love, and I continue to have to work to listen and speak when I disagree without demonizing the other person. I know of people who have left churches or their faith because they were hurt and didn’t say anything or they were confronted and shunned without an invitation to reconcile. That’s not Jesus’ way. Jesus said nothing about faith being easy. I love this community of faith and “hear me when I say that this church will let you down. I will say something dumb or someone else will hurt you, and we will fail to meet your expectations. But if you choose to leave because we let you down, you might just miss the way that the destabilizing, gorgeous, shimmering grace of God

comes in and fills in the cracks left behind from our brokenness. And it's just too beautiful to miss" (Bolz Weber). Now- it's not guaranteed that the person being confronted won't completely walk away nor that you're ready to forgive. That's up to you and God. We don't control another person's behavior nor the outcome. As Christ's disciples we're responsible for how we treat one another. This work of confronting and reconciling undergirded in love and forgiveness is challenging. Yet, "our being together is the chief means God has chosen for being with us. Our life together in a community of faith is the place where we are comforted, confronted, tested, and redeemed by God through one another" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*). Friends, don't put your trust in this church, nor in others nor your ability to be a good Christian. Put your trust in God's ability not to be stymied by our messes. Put your trust in Jesus who defiantly keeps showing up despite us (Bolz Weber). Christ's promise to us, especially in our times of conflict and confrontation, is that he is with us. "No matter how much Jesus' words have been twisted, no matter how badly this text has been used against us or that we have used it against other people, that cannot nullify the promise. There is a promise that God desires to be reconciled to us and we to each other, and that when we seek reconciliation, Christ is present. God can bind together that which our sin has ripped apart" (Bolz Weber). In other words, God's ability to get things right is always more powerful than our ability to get things wrong. Friends, the gospel invites us to forsake the ways of playing the world's games, and to follow the good way of Christ" (Camp). So disciples...let us do this hard work and live our lives worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.