

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

September 10, 2023

Collective Discernment

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter 18 of Matthew has been used, and misused, a great deal over the life of the church. And, as is often the case, it is most often misused because of proof-texting: the process of using scripture, often out of context, to support a particular agenda. Both our text for today, and the text appointed for next Sunday (Matthew 18:21-35) have to be read in the context of the opening of this chapter. So, let's read those opening verses now:

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of things that cause sin! Such things are bound to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.’”

So both Christ's teaching in our text for today regarding what to do when someone sins against you, and the teaching we'll read next week regarding forgiveness, need to be read with these opening verses in mind. All three of the sections that comprise chapter 18 have to do with life in community. But notice what kicks off these teachings on community, a simple-seeming question by the disciples: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”¹

¹ Matthew 18:1-14 (NRSVUE)

What a human question! The disciples want to know who is in charge in the kingdom of heaven. Who is the greatest, the one with the most authority? Who gets to make the decisions and who has to follow orders? What a preoccupation these disciples seem to have with hierarchy and order! While their motivations may be suspect (both the Mark² and Luke³ versions of this story indicate that they asked this question because they were arguing over which of them was the greatest), the question is an important one.

Jesus answers their question by placing a child in their midst and teaching: “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”⁴ So, in the kingdom of heaven greatness involves humility and a lack of power. That seems kind of backwards, doesn’t it? But if we carry that thought from these opening verses into our narrative today, we can see the point Jesus is trying to get across.

Elaine J. Ramshaw notes: “‘Who is the greatest?’ No question has more relevance to the process of pursuing reconciliation, at every step of the way. If we try to practice mercy while obscuring the realities of power, we are liable to perpetuate all sorts of abuses. The only hope is that we will keep our eyes on that little kid. Not just try to be childlike in some spiritualized sense, but attend to the literal child whom Jesus has moved from the periphery to the center of our attention. Then we will not forget that there are concrete differences in power in this world, that there are vulnerable ones who need protection, and that Jesus will view our communal life through the eyes of a child.”⁵

Children should not suffer seems to be a deeply rooted value for most of humanity. Now let’s consider God’s view of humanity. As you have heard me assert repeatedly, we are ALL blessed and beloved children of God who even bear God’s own image. Is it so hard to extrapolate from this the understanding that ANY AND ALL pain, suffering, and death offends God deeply? The deep indignation we feel at the death of a child is what God feels at **any** death.

By centering the weak and powerless from the start of this chapter, Jesus is teaching a particular way of pursuing reconciliation in our reading today. And that same centering is vitally important for our text next Sunday as well. If we ignore Christ’s centering of the powerless at the beginning of this text we should not be surprised when the rest of this chapter gets abused. Take, for example, the long history of the church’s generally terrible response to domestic abuse.

² Mark 9:33-34

³ Luke 9:46-48

⁴ Matthew 18:4

⁵ Ramshaw, Elaine. “Power and Forgiveness in Matthew 18.” *Word & World*, vol. 18, no. 4, Fall 1998, pp. 397–404.

When a domestic abuse victim seeks to hold a perpetrator accountable in the church, what has traditionally happened? Unfortunately, time and again, the church has responded not with our reading today, but rather the reading for next week, telling the victim to forgive 70 times 7 times. If we take seriously Christ's centering of the powerless then we would respond to the victim's pain with the reconciliation and accountability path from our reading today instead. A path that calls upon the perpetrators of abuse and conflict to repent of their sin, rather than asking the victim to forgive.

The church has a long history, and current practice, of protecting the powerful through processes of conflict and "reconciliation." Whether children or women or people of color or people with disabilities or LGBTQIA people...when harm is done, even where systems are put in place to respond to that harm, more often than not, the powerful are not held accountable for their actions in any serious way. Or if they are, they are quickly banished, the case is set aside, and no one else in the community is invited to explore the ways they too are reflected in the heart of the one who did harm. The root (theological, cultural, and structural) causes go unaddressed, as the singular individual is perceived as entirely different from the whole.

By centering a powerless child at the start of this chapter, Jesus is inviting his followers to approach conflict resolution from a particular path...the Way of Christ. Our reading today makes it clear that the Way involves a deep desire for reconciliation and healing. It also involves communal discernment. When we are unable to resolve conflicts ourselves, we appeal to the community more and more. Until, if reconciliation is not possible, we resort to treating the perpetrator as "a gentile and a tax collector," treating them as beloved by God, but also in need of hearing and experiencing the Gospel.

We deal with conflict as a community (for conflict will affect our community no matter how big or small). We deal with suffering, accountability, and forgiveness as a community too. And as we discern how to navigate these inevitable challenges, the Way of Christ teaches us to do so communally.

Why is communal discernment so necessary? It is how we keep one another on the Way! When I start down the path of reconciliation without accountability I need the community to remind me of the Way that centers the powerless. The same goes when I preach forgiveness without reconciliation. Communal discernment is how we, as a community of faith, adhere to the values that Christ teaches; the values of the Way.

Mark Allan Powell brings exceptionally helpful context to the conversation of binding and loosing - a practice of applying scripture to life in context. Because God's will for life is not a one-size fits all laundry list of to-do or not-to-do, we need practices of discernment for how to understand the application of the law to our lives

in context. He explains, “Jewish rabbis ‘bound’ the law when they determined that a commandment was applicable to a particular situation, and they ‘loosed’ the law when they determined that a word of scripture...was not applicable under certain specific circumstances.”⁶

There are priorities in scripture. Justice. Mercy. Community. Freedom. Love. When the law is interpreted in such a way that these are no longer practiced, that is wrong application of the law. The Rabbis, like Jesus does, are meant to bring the law into the rightful application of the priorities of scripture so as to prevent unnecessary burden or condemnation “of the guiltless.”⁷

In this text, Jesus is giving the authority to make this decision - when the law should be bound or loosed - to the disciples. Today, in faith community, this authority is meant to be shared by the collective people. Not meant to be the work of one individual. Not meant to be done privately and solely in isolation from others. Not a task to be completed outside of conversation with the whole story of God, but one we engage together across the centuries, across experiences, and across contexts. Struggling with ethics, scripture, and the world around us, we discern God’s will for living in the here and now, in the modern realities of this time. We bind together what needs our attention and loose that which unnecessarily condemns and constraints, especially when and where harm is being done.

I end with these words from a domestic abuse survivor of the vital importance of a community dedicated to discernment through the Way of Christ: “In the end, that was most damaging. Doing it alone. Believing it was all my responsibility. Not the assault. But the healing. The justice. The protection of nameless other girls... Because what I needed, maybe more than his apology, was a community of people who could help me hold and honor all the stories that led to this one, who could help me uproot the layers of silence learned through too much violence. I needed to be asked what I wanted and what I was hoping for...I needed someone who was going to sit with me through the fallout...I needed someone beside me to reflect the ways my own trauma, old and new, was informing the process. I needed someone who could show me love that was deeper and more nuanced than just hating him... The violence of poverty, white supremacy, militarism, assault - they are woven together. No court can ever pull them apart. A prison can never protect me. Isolation cannot heal isolation.”⁸
Amen.

⁶ Powell, Mark Allan. “Binding and Loosing: A Paradigm for Ethical Discernment from the Gospel of Matthew.” *Currents in Theology and Mission*, vol. 30, no. 6, Dec. 2003, pp. 438–445.

⁷ Matthew 12:7

⁸ Blyth Barnow *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*