

## **Mending the Broken Body of Christ, September 4, 2011**

I read a story about how, years ago, in Virginia, most denominations were against tobacco but generally ignored the fact that plenty of their church members were tobacco farmers or laborers. All but the Pentecostal Holiness Church, who took their anti-tobacco stance seriously.

Every spring, when their members planted their tobacco, the preacher would go out to the fields and first read to the farmers and field hands the section in the Pentecostal Holiness Discipline forbidding involvement in “the tobacco trade” and then he’d read the scripture we just heard from Matthew.

A few weeks later the preacher would bring two elders with him and do it again. Some time before Memorial Day, the women and children of the congregation would gather in solemn assembly to excommunicate their fathers, husbands and brothers. Then everyone would go home to a nice Sunday dinner.

In the fall, after the harvesting and marketing of the tobacco crop, the women and children would vote their men-folk back in, just in time for the church to collect a tithe on the proceeds of the tobacco sale.

The storyteller writes, “While following the Bible literally and carefully, the Pentecostal Holiness folks managed to miss the entire point of Jesus’ teaching, using the text to keep the church clean from the messiness of sin while Jesus meant it as a way to bring messy, sinful people back into the household of faith.”

Chapter 18 of Matthew shows us how that’s so. You might think it’s all about sin - it’s mentioned a lot- why you should avoid sin, how you should deal with sin, what will happen if you do it.

But if you read more deeply, you’ll see that it’s actually so much more about restoration. It’s about gathering members back in, back home, back together as one, when sin has broken the church. It’s about restoring, not only the sinner, but the church, the ekklesia, the gathering, the people as a people, which is not whole if even one has gotten lost, or been driven out.

Matthew’s Jesus is interested in bringing messy sinners back to a messy church, and sitting everyone down at the table, again and again, to celebrate the wholeness that can’t be forced, or faked, or trivialized, but only given as gift by the Christ who serves us here. Such a miracle of mercy and grace, that he, himself, is among us.

It begins with a warning, in verses 5-7, not so much to the sinner, but to the one who tempts another, especially a little one, a weaker one, an innocent one, to sin. Better you should drown in the sea with a big block of cement tied to your neck. And then he says, don’t look at everyone else’s wrongdoing. Look first to yourself. Before blaming or accusing another, or X-ing them out of your life, look first at your own heart, words,

actions, or motives for what might be amiss and set your own behavior right. That should keep you busy for a lifetime.

Then, in verses 10-14, Jesus tells of his Father's concern for the one sheep who has gotten lost, through sin, we assume, since that's what this chapter's about. And yet, the emphasis throughout isn't on the juiciness of the sin, but on the broken community and how to make it whole again. The parable of the 100<sup>th</sup> sheep is not about the sin that led the sheep astray, or the badness of that errant sheep, or the terrible punishment that awaits it. It's about how to get that sheep home again, to restore it to the fold, so the flock will be whole once more.

Then come verses 15-20, the passage for today, and then, immediately, in verse 21, there are those words about forgiving 70 x 7 times, which doesn't mean, by the way, 490 times and then you're done. It's a poetic way of saying "forgive to infinity." And, finally, lest you miss the point, comes the parable of the king who forgave the debt of his servant, but whose servant failed to forgive his debtor, and paid a hard price for his failing in mercy. Such a price will my father extract, says Jesus, from all who do not forgive their brother or sister from the heart. From the heart.

If you look at where today's words sit, you can see that they're not so much about casting the offender out, but bringing her home, which sounds to my ears like the sweetest good news, because the offender, the sinner, the strayed sheep is way too often *me*.

Matthew's Jesus is passionate, here, about healing and restoring the community, which is broken when **even just one member** is lost, or hiding, or shut out, or even just one relationship is fractured. But when sin does break the community – not if, when – Jesus has a prescription for mending it:

The hurt or offended one goes to speak directly with the offender and gently, honestly, speaks his or her truth.

If that doesn't repair things, she tries again with a witness who can be objective, who can help each one hear the other, who can help heal and restore the relationship, and thereby heal and restore the whole congregation.

If that doesn't work, says Jesus, "Tell the whole church."

Now, I really don't know what that means, but I'm pretty sure it's not how the Pentecostal Holiness Church did it. Nor could it be the gossip and whisper campaigns we sometimes employ when hurt or mad.

Perhaps it's a stretch, but maybe he means that the whole church should surround and embrace the hurt and the hurting one, and reach out to those who push us away, and never give up on any one, and go an extra mile to find a lost sheep, and forgive, and forgive, and forgive, and forgive yet again, and once more still, until the broken ekklesia is whole.

Because he goes on to say that the unrepentant one, the unrelentingly hurtful one, the irrepressibly insensitive and annoying one, the one who is unsafe walking down the dark and violent streets of our hearts, should be treated like a tax-collector and Gentile.

But how is that? How did Jesus treat them?

He ate with them. He embraced them. He loved them and brought them home. And so should we, because, more often than not, they will be us, and we will be glad for the forgiveness we are shown. And, in the mended community, made whole again by the holiness of reconciliation, Christ is among us.

Amen.