

Sermon Notes
September 10, 2023 Peace Lutheran Church
The Holy Gospel of Matthew 18: 15-20
“Restoring Relationship”

If ever there was a time to proclaim our utter reliance on God's grace, the message of Matthew 18 is certainly it. GRACE is the watchword for the day with this gospel reading, and indeed for all the readings this Sunday, because it is only by our Father's free gift of grace that we can practice the ministry of reconciliation and live as the beloved community of forgiven and forgiving siblings in Christ.

Grace frees and enables us to follow Jesus' teaching in Matthew, and to do conflict in ways that emphasize tenacious love. Grace shapes us into merciful people of the God of mercy, who proclaims through Ezekiel, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live” (33: 11). By grace and through baptism we “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” are clothed in “the armor of light,” and are empowered to heed Paul's instructions to “owe no one anything, except to love another” (Rom. 13: 14, 12, 8). Through confession we acknowledge that we fall short of the law of love, failing to love the Father with our whole heart and love our neighbors as ourselves. But though law and gospel-preaching also proclaim the life-giving truth that we pray will take root in the listener of His Word, and that our hearts will be saved by grace and strengthened with power through the Holy Spirit. And from there, we shall live as resurrected people, turning repeatedly from hateful practice and returning again and again to the practice of love.

The grace-filled message in Matthew 18 must also be mindful of those in our community who have been deeply wounded. It is far easier (and common) for victims of grievous violence and war to believe the onus for reconciliation is on them ...especially if they have been subject to a rigidly legalistic denomination. Instead, we need to be sensitive to instances of traumatic, lasting hurt in the body of Christ (whether inflicted by another member or by someone outside the community) exhibiting great care to avoid giving the impression that it is the victim's responsibility to repair the damage.

Further still, most of us also need to hear and heed Jesus' mandate to “go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone” (18: 15). Rather than speaking openly and honestly with the person who has hurt us, we would much rather nurse our grudges, carry the chip on our shoulder, gossip about the offender and expose them to shame. But Jesus, never inclined to let us off the hook, calls us to higher ground: before taking our case to others, first speak the

truth in love to the sibling who has sinned against you. With the help of God's grace, you will "regain that one" and allow for true healing to occur.

Even as we rely on God's grace to be people of mercy and forgiveness, so too do we need humility. Christ's teaching that "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (18: 18) is not a license for arrogance, especially when those in positions of power are engaged in the binding and loosing. Rather, because Jesus promises to be among us when we gather, we also confess that we are not the ones with all the answers; in deep humility we acknowledge that too often in the church we make decisions or throw out opinions that do not reflect the law of love. We often only think of what's best for ourselves and not about the shoes someone else is wearing. Sinners and saints alike, we take up the responsibility of binding and loosing with fear and trembling, praying for the grace to "become models of the kind of body the larger church and the whole world need."