

The Twenty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time – YrA – 10 September 2023

Message: *Love in disagreement and grow through it!*

Creator, Redemer, and Giver of Life, known to us, through creation, community, and mystical communion, may we know the Eternal Word and Way. **Amen.**

Today's gospel passage is challenging; It is part of the material unique to Matthew's Gospel, closely related to the passage of two weeks ago, "*you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church... whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*"

These passages have the only occurrences of ἐκκλησία, church, in the gospels. ἐκκλησία more broadly means community. Israel is the ἐκκλησία of Yahweh in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Hebrew scriptures. The normal Greek word for community is συναγωγή so ἐκκλησία seems out of place. Matthew is probably interpreting Jesus's teaching for his ἐκκλησία but it is still based in Jesus teaching and we still need to wrestle with what this means for us.

Some of the most ancient copies of this passage in the phrase "if anyone sins against you" lack the words "against you". This gives the passage a much broader application, if we even perceive someone is sinning, we are to correct them. This interpretation is supported by the letter to the Galatians (6.1) which says, "*My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.*" which at least emphasises gentleness;

passages such as our second reading make it clear that this must be done in love, not just gentleness.

Nonetheless, there is a major question: How do we judge what is a sin or transgression? And, beyond that, how does it relate to the earlier passage in Matthew, (7.1-5) *“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”*

At this point, I will confess that today’s gospel comes with some personal baggage having been on the receiving end of someone who felt compelled to *“point out the fault”* when my first marriage was breaking up: no exploration of my pastoral needs, no compassion, just condemnation. Yet, in his worldview, he was acting out of love, and trying to correct and guide me back to a right relationship with God.

As you will notice, I have remained a part of the church, yet a close friend who experienced the same has not been to church since. As a chaplain, I met a whole host of people who, for a wide variety of *“faults”* have felt pushed out of the church. Those parts of the church that have pushed them out tend to have a very clear idea of what sin is.

At this point, I find myself tempted towards a quite unhelpful rant that, as therapeutic as it might be, would lack congruence with what I believe, which is that, as stated in our second reading, love of neighbour is at the absolute heart of the gospel, and of the way of the Nazarene.

There are many situations in which it is difficult to find a loving way forward. In ethics there are what are known as

“wicked problems”, problems where there is no solution that meets all of our desired ethical outcomes. We are faced with choosing the least bad option. There are relationship situations much like that too.

However, there are also many areas where, with the knowledge we have today, in the society we live in, and our evolving understanding of the gospel, what were perceived as sins in the past, as well as what was considered righteous, has changed in the most profound ways.

There are areas where this is easy to recognise. We acknowledge that slavery is wrong, that we are not going to suffocate when we travel on a train, that telephones may occasionally be useful, that smoking is not good for your health, that wearing seatbelts is sensible. You will be able to recognise attitudes that you have changed in your own lifetime. The attitudes of the global village are changing rapidly in response to our changing knowledge, society, and world.

Once, changing attitudes were driven by Christian values, abolition of slavery, schools, and hospital for all, for example. This prophetic voice seems to have been lost somewhere along the way. We are called to proclaim the gospel afresh to each new generation, yet today we seem determined to proclaim an incomprehensible, irrelevant, and inconsequential gospel. We need a fresh vision for what loving relationships look like today, with creation, between communities, and between one another, and of how to remove the logs from our own eyes, which we first need to recognise are there.

So, at the very least it seems we need to be cautious when we choose to “*point out the fault*” of another.

However, it does raise the question of what we do when the actions, or inactions, of someone in the church wound us. This is the situation that Matthew and several epistles address. There is a temptation to hear the reading in a very individualist way. Yet, that was not what the writers of the gospels and epistles ever had in mind.

Our hope is to be a community, ἐκκλησία, that encourages one another as followers of the way of Jesus of Nazareth. When there is a broken relationship between any two members of our community it damages our community as a whole. It damages our ability to support one another.

We are reasonably good at allowing for our differences here. But sometimes there is a real falling out between people and we need to find a way of navigating through that which brings healing and wholeness. This needs wisdom and grace.

The gospel of Matthew was written for a Jewish audience. It seems likely that the practices of the synagogues of the day are behind today's reading and their interpretation of Deuteronomistic law. Two or three is an echo of the two or three witnesses required in a legal setting, which they applied as a more general principal.

The first step is to try to sort things out ourselves. With wisdom, listening, and grace from both sides, it is often possible to sort out our differences. We don't have to agree on everything. In fact, if we are to proclaim the gospel afresh, we are going to need some robust and detailed debate, which will require all of us to have grace and openness of heart.

Nonetheless, sometimes there are wounds that cannot, for a variety of reasons, be resolved. If we are following the biblical

pattern, we don't immediately involve the whole church; we involve just two or three other people.

Given how well rumours circulate around churches we appear to have a poor track record at involving just two or three other people. Yet, a few is the gospel way. We do not need to wound others along the way. The way of Christ is always the way of love, bringing wholeness to others.

Sharing something with the church is a last resort and the details are not generally needed. It is about more than a difference of opinion; it is about when one person's actions have wounded another. Even that is challenging to define. In the unexpected line of Jim Cotter's version of the Lord's Prayer, in night prayer in our prayer books, "*In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.*" We are challenged to have the grace to acknowledge our part in every situation, and the ways in which we have fallen short.

The final two verses of are gospel reading seem a little odd. Yet, remembering the Hebrew legal framework behind Matthew's thinking they take on new meaning for the whole process. When we bring about healing and reconciliation, what is agreed on earth is agreed in heaven. And, similarly, when two or three bring about such peace and healing, there is Christ in the midst of them.

In our disagreements and our wounds there is great potential. It is potential to damage the church or to grow the church. When we bring about healing, there is the presence of the Glory of Christ in the midst of us. No pressure then! Our disagreements can be seeds of hope and growth if we will just care for them with wisdom, listening, grace, and love.