

Make Us One
Matthew 18:15-20
September 7, 2008

This past week Maxine Easom and I spent an entire day in the church office, cleaning out, reorganizing, and straightening up so that the space could be reclaimed as an office and not remain what it had become – a junk room, full of all kinds of stuff nobody knew what to do with. If you have a chance, stick your head in the door and admire the transformation. In the course of our re-organization we went through all of the books that had long sat untouched on the shelves. Some were so out of date that they needed to be recycled. Others we sent to the Potters' House. And others we kept as still having current usefulness and relevance to us in study or devotion.

We also found books of church records dating back to the 1800's. And that's where we slowed down and started reading names of people long gone who had made being a member of Oconee St. church a central part of their lives. Births, deaths, baptisms, confirmations, transfers of membership all written in that beautiful, ornate, old-fashioned handwriting from long ago.

But we also found minutes of some very serious meetings. In May 1879, a committee met with a member to discuss with him a certain "immorality," specifically "intoxication." This brother of the church was found "guilty of the charges" and suspended for six months. Another member, also found guilty of the same "immorality" was suspended for four months. Earlier another member had been charged with "betting on the day of the Election for congress" but there was no notation of the dispensation of that case. Still other minutes indicated that one of the aforementioned brothers "promised amendment at the last church meeting. He has not fulfilled his obligations, but does not attend service or attend to his duties as a Christian." Another member, however, had "made confession and promised amendment." The meeting authorized a representative to go to another brother to inform him that "the church forgave him and hoped he would try to do better in the future."

In minutes from a quarterly conference, held in 1881, the pastor's report included this summary, "We have had a blessed meeting at this church since our last quarterly meeting. Many of the members were greatly blessed; some who were backslidden were reclaimed and started out anew." But he opines, "Making all the allowances that the greatest charity demands, still I think there is a large number of the members who do not attend church as they should. We have instituted measures which we hope will be beneficial and trust before the year ends many who are now cold and backslidden will be reclaimed and scores and multitudes converted to God." At that time the church had 314 members.

What a great serendipitous event to find these ancient notes a few days before we read from Matthew's gospel Jesus' words on accountability, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Our forebears in this church obviously took those words to heart. And they applied them in the way that seemed best to them. They were willing to go to a member who had "sinned" and hold him accountable, and encourage repentance and restoration to the fellowship. And although suspending someone from membership or making a public judgment that someone "does not attend to his duties as a Christian," may seem unduly harsh to our modern ears, there is something about the earnestness and deep seriousness and sincerity of these notes that touches my heart. The members of Oconee St. Methodist Episcopal Church, South took church membership and what it means to be a community of faith very seriously.

Well, times change, and we read these same words of Jesus from a different perspective today. Our culture is more mobile, we no longer can claim a consensus on what constitutes an "offense," we give higher authority now to our personal feelings and opinions, and we have taken a therapeutic position on repentance, regeneration and restitution rather than a punitive

one. Does that mean then that with our radical shift in cultural values that Jesus' words here in Matthew are incredible and impractical, perhaps even impossible, today?

I have to admit that I've read these verses with somewhat that very attitude. My natural inclination is to avoid confrontation rather than to invite it. I'm much more likely to hope quietly that someone or some situation will change for the better, or if not change, then just go away, than I am to actively intervene. I'm more likely to skip to step two of Jesus' instructions – telling somebody else first, than I am to go directly and alone to someone who's done something that has hurt me. I'm probably, if I'm honest with myself, a bit passive-aggressive at times. Instead of admitting ill will, or conflict, it's easier just to say something slightly at another person's expense. You know that phrase "bless his heart," or "bless her heart." What does it mean when you put it in front of something you're about to say about another person. "Good old so-and-so, bless her heart, she means well" and then we proceed to take them down a peg or two, usually with a smile on our faces and gentleness in our voices, masking the disappointment or the hurt that is actually there.

I have read with relief the verse where Jesus says, if all else fails, then it's OK to treat certain people as Gentiles and tax collectors. I have always taken this to mean that there comes a point with certain people where I can just wash my hands of them and be done. I've always thought this passage means that we all have limits, even limits on the graciousness demanded of us as Christians. And in those instances, it is all right, it is even justifiable to give up, and to walk away.

But then I read this passage again. And what seemed at first cut and dried, now seemed a bit ambiguous. What does Jesus mean when he says "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector"? Certainly, the Pharisees and the Scribes knew how to treat Gentiles and tax collectors – they were sinners and unclean, so they shunned them. There was nothing ambiguous at all to the Pharisees about Jesus' statement.

But how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He ate with them and healed them; he praised them for their faith; he called Matthew, the author of this very gospel, as his disciple while Matthew was out tax collecting.

And then there's another complication. This passage is preceded by the parable of the lost sheep and the reminder that God rejoices over one who was lost but now is found. And it is followed by a teaching on forgiveness – that we forgive not seven times but seventy times seven; in other words, an unlimited number of times. So it is in this context then of celebration over the recovery of the lost and proclamation of extravagant, unlimited love and forgiveness that Jesus says we should treat our unrepentant brothers and sisters Gentiles and tax collectors.

The 18th chapter of Matthew as a whole is concerned with the responsibilities of following Jesus, the cost of being a Christian, and the kind of love and accountability that it takes to be a part of the community of faith – accountability and love even to and for those whom we don't particularly like, or don't have anything in common with, or with whom we disagree. It addresses our own sinfulness in so quickly forsaking relationships in favor of nursing our hurt feelings and our wounded pride. And it expresses how eager we are to repay sin with more sin.

I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that Jesus doesn't give us an excuse to exclude, or permission to feel superior. Instead he encourages wholeness and healing. He seeks to draw us all into the best life there is to be lived—a life faithful to God and to the body of Christ, this community that we call the church. This passage challenges us to examine our choices and to recognize that we can choose to build up or tear down.

It calls us to recognize that we are all sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God. We all act selfishly; we are all less than perfect in much of what we do. We say things and do things that are hurtful to ourselves and to others; we act in ways that are unfaithful to God and betray trust. It forces us to remember that any approach we make to another person must be

made with humility and in full knowledge that we ourselves may sooner or later be held accountable for our own shortcomings.

This passage advises us to do the hard and courageous work of getting things out in the open, of airing grievances in a positive and constructive way, of talking things over, because hurts that are unaddressed just fester under the surface and cause deeper problems. Jesus advises us to go to the one from whom we or our community are estranged, not to force an apology or to humiliate, or to win a fight, but to be an instrument of healing and forgiveness, so that the community of faith can be mended and strengthened.

Realistically, however, sometimes all our best efforts in that regard fail. And then when harmony cannot be restored, we are told to treat the others as a Gentile or a tax collector, just as Jesus would. Not to throw up our hands and walk away, but to throw open our hands, and love them not less, but more, to redouble our efforts to achieve reconciliation, not retribution. In short, like Jesus, to be evangelists of God's love that never gives up on anyone.

Life in Christ is a community affair. Where two or three are gathered, that's when Christ promises to be in our midst. Two heads are better than one; we can accomplish more together than apart. And that is just as true in difficult times as in easy ones, maybe more so. In our attempts to confront, to speak the truth, to offer and to receive forgiveness, we mirror in our own small ways what God has done for us. When we remain in relationship, when we refuse to ignore wrong that has been done, when we humbly confess the wrong we have done and ask to be forgiven, here in this place, we become a little corner of heaven.

That is what is at the heart of the prayer we will offer together in a moment at this communion table. Listen for the words, "By your spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet." Notice the order of things in that prayer – first, one with Christ; second, one with each other – those two things have to come before the third is possible, "one in ministry to all the world." When that unity is in place, then here in this church we become a foretaste, a dress rehearsal for what is going on always in heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen.