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**Reconciliation Not Discipline**

**September 10, 2017**

**Matthew 815-20**

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from our Lord, Jesus Christ, the one who teaches us to love God and one another above all else, amen.

Several years ago, I was serving as an interim Pastor at the Lutheran Church in Germantown. The drive from my house in West Milton took about 45 minutes straight south on Diamond Mill Road. On Easter Sunday morning as I drove the country roads my mind was going over the main points I wanted to bring out in the sermon. The next thing I knew I looked in the rear-view mirror to see flashing blue and red light of a state trooper. Apparently, I had still been in the town limits when I sped back up to cruising speed. When I passed the officer, who was waiting in plain view to catch speeders such as myself, I was so deep in thought, I didn’t even see his patrol car. After telling me why he pulled me over he noticed my clerical collar and asked if I was a pastor. I told him I was and where I was headed. I admitted to not paying attention to the speed limit as I was thinking about the morning worship service. At this point the officer had a decision to make. I had clearly broken the law, but he had it within his power to hold me accountable or to let me off the hook. I was lucky that time. He let me go with a warning to be careful. The Ohio State Trooper probably didn’t realize it, but he had loosed the law. That’s a perfect example of what Jesus means when he tells the early church that we, as church, have the responsibility to do just that, to either bind or loosen the law.

This morning’s Gospel story has been used as a template for Church Discipline for centuries. Taken at face value, and stripped out of the context where it’s placed within Matthew’s Gospel, it’s easy to see how the Church came to that conclusion. The thing is, you can’t just take a few verses and pluck them out of their greater context and say this is what they mean or this is how we’ll interpret them forever more. Bible stories always have a greater context. So, what is the context of Jesus teaching when someone sins against you?

First off, not all Bible translations even read the same. Many of the surviving ancient manuscripts leave off the whole “against you” part of Jesus saying and that has a significant effect on the meaning of the text. If we read it with the against you, it becomes very personal, but if those words were not in the original the meaning broadens out to include another Church member just sinning in general, but not necessarily against you personally. The other problem I have with the translation itself is the way the committee changed the wording from the Greek. We read it in the English as, “If another church member sins…”, but the Greek is very specific in that it specifies a much more intimate family relationship by saying, “If your brother sins…” I know why the translation committee changed brother to another church member. They did it to make the words gender inclusive, but in the process, they made the situation Jesus is describing much less personal and much more public. If I had been on the committee, I would have insisted the change be made to something like, “If your brother or sister sins…” I’m not just being picky, well I might be, but I think I’ve got a pretty good reason for my pickiness. If the committee decided to include the against you phrase, making this personally about me, then why generalize the first part making it between me and just some random church member? If these words were really spoken from the lips of Jesus, I believe he would have made both ends of this relationship personal. This situation is not about some random church member committing some random sin that may or may not be any of my business. It’s about someone I’m very close, like a brother, a sister, or a family member who does something against me personally.

So, now that we have the situation framed, let’s take a step back and see if there’s any nuggets we can mine from what comes before and after our story. As we step back I noticed that this story comes after Jesus answered the disciples question about who will be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus answered them by placing a small child in front of them and making the bold and controversial statement that they must change and become like that small child in order to even enter the Kingdom. Then he said, “Whoever becomes humble like this child will be first in Heaven.” So, it’s not about innocence or naivete or any other quaint notion of childlike behavior, it’s about humility.

To further illustrate his point, Jesus goes on to describe one of the most common, if not **the** most common, human conflict, when one sibling sins against another. Anyone remember how unchecked sibling rivalry ended for Cain and Able? Not good, I can tell you that… Here’s how this usually works out in my experience. When I’m the one who’s been wronged, you know the sinned against one, well I expect the other person to come to me and apologize. Right? I mean if I’m going to forgive them I at least expect them to be sorry for that horrible thing they did to me. After all, I have my rights. I’m the victim here. How dare they do that to me in the first place… And it goes on and on in my mind…

My problem is I haven’t become humble as a little child. In Jesus day children were not placed way up there on that high pedestal. Children today are treated like gods and idols. Not so in Jesus time. Children were no more than a piece of furniture. They had no rights and they depended on the kindness of their parents for everything. You see back then adults had to spend every minute of every day trying to make some kind of a living. They had no leisure time for baseball, soccer, football, cheering, or dance. So, when Jesus said you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven unless you become humble like a child, he meant like someone who has no rights to anything. Meanwhile here I am insisting on my right to have you apologize and feel sorrow for your actions in hurting me. Not exactly kingdom behavior, is it?

What might be a better way for me when I find myself having been the one who was sinned against? What does it look like to go to the other person as one with no rights to an apology? That’s a hard question. In this country, we have it ingrained into us from the time we can walk and talk that we have rights and privileges. Humility isn’t taught in civics class. When you approach someone who has hurt you in some way in humility, with no rights, you approach them as a beggar. This sin has come between you and broken the relationship you once had. For Jesus and for us as Christians, the relationship we have together is the main thing. Saint Paul says we are the Body of Christ. We only function as a body when we’re relating to each other. This sin has broken that and when we approach the other person in humility, it’s the relationship that’s a stake, not my rights to extract an apology or to watch them suffer as they’ve made me suffer.

The truth is, this passage is much more about reconciliation than it is about Church Discipline. Yet you’ll see these verses cited in the constitution of the ELCA, the Synod and even our own Trinity constitution. The next time you feel wronged, by your brother, sister, another family member, or even by some random church member like your pastor, let’s all try to keep the picture of Jesus holding up that little child with no rights at all in the forefront of our thinking. Then maybe, just maybe, we can regain the broken relationships or prevent them from getting more broken then they already are. I’ll tell you something else. If more people would consider these examples from Jesus, situations like Charlottesville might have turned out a whole lot differently.

Remember my Easter morning encounter with the police officer? His forgiveness let me off the hook from paying a fine and getting points on my license. His actions had earthly consequences. When we approach the one who sinned against us with humility and loose the bonds of the law in order to reconcile and mend what was broken, Jesus tells us it has heavenly consequences. What we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. The thing is, the chains that bind that sin also bind us too. You can’t be free to enter the Kingdom, not because Jesus won’t allow you in, but because you’ve bound yourself up in clinging to your rights. In my life experience, I’ve felt those chains being released when I finally gave up my right to feel hurt and my right to hearing others apologize and my rights to see them hurt as badly as they hurt me. None of that matters when what’s at stake is living into the Kingdom of Heaven, not later when you die, but right now, when it can still make a difference in your life.

May we be a people who can become humble like a little child. May we approach not just the ones who sin against us, but every person in every situation in our lives with humility and love. May the relationships we have with others and with our God and Savior Jesus Christ be the most important things in our lives, so much so, that we place higher value on them than even our own rights. Amen.