

November 15

Lesson 11

Worship as the Church

Focal Passage: Matthew 18:15-20; Hebrews 10:19-25

Background Text: Same

Purpose Statement: To celebrate worship as entering into God's presence and as reconciliation and fellowship with the family of faith

Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵"If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you've won over your brother or sister. ¹⁶But if they won't listen, take with you one or two others so that *every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses*. ¹⁷But if they still won't pay attention, report it to the church. If they won't pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector. ¹⁸I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven. ¹⁹Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them."

Hebrews 10:19-25

¹⁹Brothers and sisters, we have confidence that we can enter the holy of holies by means of Jesus' blood, ²⁰through a new and living way that he opened up for us through the curtain, which is his body, ²¹and we have a great high priest over God's house.

²²Therefore, let's draw near with a genuine heart with the certainty that our faith gives us, since our hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies are washed with pure water.

²³Let's hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who

made the promises is reliable.

²⁴And let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds. ²⁵Don't stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.

Key Verse: "Don't stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:25).

When I started typing, "Why are so many people done" into my internet search engine, the first option that appeared to complete my thought was "with church?" The phenomenon of people dropping out of church has become so prominent that many articles have appeared to explain it.

In many cases, the people who have dropped out of church still believe in God, still pray, still accept the tenets of the Christian faith, but do not attend church anymore. Often those who have dropped out have served in leadership roles in their congregations. People who simply have no religious affiliation carry the label of "nones"; those who have dropped out of church carry the label "dones."

The articles I read offer a variety of reasons why people have become "dones." In a lot of instances, the reasons stem from problems the church could solve.

Churches have not kept up with technology, for example. The many scandals of the church and various kinds of abuse within the church have turned people off. Young people find themselves disheartened by a lack of diversity in the church. Church leaders (lay and clergy) already work hard; but without some attention to these problems, more people, especially young people, will leave the church.¹

If we read the Matthew passage and the Hebrews passage, we gain insights into two of the ways people leave a congregation. In New Testament times, people did not have the option of leaving one congregation and joining another, but that happens frequently in the contemporary United States. If people left a church in the first century, they left the Christian church. Matthew does not describe a person deciding to leave the church, but what he portrays lies behind one of the reasons people today leave a church.

Resolving Conflict

Matthew 18:15-20 describes a situation in which one person clearly sins and another person clearly becomes the victim of the sin. It outlines a process by which the person sinned against can expose the sin.

First, the victim tries to explain the sin to the offender and seeks reconciliation (Matthew 18:15). If that doesn't work, the victim brings a witness or witnesses to the offender to provide evidence of the offender's fault (verse 16). At that point, if the offender does not acknowledge the sin and seek to make amends, the church expels the member (the likely meaning of the person becoming like "a Gentile and tax collector," verse 17). The process, correctly followed, intends to lead to reconciliation, not punishment, of the sinner.

As scholars have pointed out, verse 19 does not suggest that two or more Christians can ask for what they want and receive it. Rather, the verse affirms the authority of the church to make these decisions about sinners in the church, for the sake of the overall health of the community.²

Following the passage about how to deal with conflict in the church comes a parable from Jesus about forgiveness (verses 21-35). The parable responds to Peter's question, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?" (verse 21).

The parable and the passage about conflict in the church seem to have some tension between them. In the advice we find in verses 15-20, the sinner receives only two chances. In the parable and in Jesus' response to Peter, a Christian should extend mercy and forgiveness multiple times. If Jesus meant that we should forgive those who ask for forgiveness, that does not come out explicitly in Jesus' words.

The two teachings back-to-back show the difficulty of working out the problem of solving church conflicts. In my experience as a church member and as a pastor, situations arise in which the roles of "perpetrator" and "victim" do not line up neatly. In a conflict, both sides claim that the other sinned against them. If church member A brought two others to talk to church member B, B would feel as though the church was "ganging up on him." For those reasons, I am not sure the exact process described in verses 15-20 would work in many cases.

What does work is the idea of trying to reconcile conflicts, of talking out problems, and of seeing other church members as family. If two people cannot resolve a conflict by themselves, others might mediate and help come to a resolution.

In my experience, conflict in the church often leads to one or both parties leaving the

congregation. The passage gives the option of trying to work out the issues. Also in my experience, a church leader should avoid taking sides and labeling one party the "sinner." The process for removing a congregation member in The United Methodist Church is quite complicated. I have known pastors who had to resort to the process, but the pastor had to enlist the help of the district superintendent to accomplish the task.

In church conflicts, leaders must walk a fine line between accountability and forgiveness/grace. A church member cannot be allowed to hurt people in the congregation. Some behavior is clearly out of bounds. Nevertheless, the passage teaches us about the goal of resolving conflict. We seek to restore, to bring reconciliation. We also recognize that church conflict often leads people to leave the church. Sometimes the conflict can seem small, but people leave nevertheless.

How have you seen conflicts resolved in your church? In what ways did the resolution of the conflict draw upon the principles of the passage from Matthew?

Gaining Endurance

The passage from Hebrews treats another reason why people leave a congregation. The Book of Hebrews speaks to a congregation in which people had begun to fade away from the church (Hebrews 2:1; 6:4). Much of the motivation for dropping out of church arose from social pressure and some persecution (10:32-34).

The author of Hebrews wrote to encourage the people to stay in the church. He pointed to Jesus' willingness to undergo suffering in solidarity with us (4:15) and exhorted those in the church to build solidarity to support one another (3:13; 10:25).

Few Christians in the United States today face true persecution, although some Christians endure ridicule. Christians who pursue ministries of social justice, trying to help the homeless or immigrants, do receive threats and backlash.

Hebrews speaks to the "dones," who are simply tired of church, weary of the hassles, no longer interested in putting in the effort. Hebrews portrays the Christian life as a race that requires endurance (12:1). The text from Hebrews 10 encourages those who have contemplated withdrawing from the church to continue to meet. It exhorts the church to reach out to members to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24, NIV). Part of that motivation is remembering all that Christ has done for us (verses 19-21) and the promise of what awaits us (verse 23).

When you feel weary of church hassles, how do you motivate yourself to hang in there? In what ways have others helped you deal with your weariness?

Worship, Reconciliation, and Endurance

The Matthew passage and the Hebrews passage present two of the scenarios by which many people leave the church. Matthew covers church conflict, and Hebrews covers a lack of endurance.

At least one more reason why people leave church comes to mind for me. People often leave because of theological or ethical disputes. The question for this lesson concerns how worship can enable reconciliation and encourage endurance. Although a change in worship styles can lead to defections, we will concentrate on how worship can help with reconciliation and endurance.

Worship lifts us out of ourselves. We worship God primarily because of who God is, not because we want our needs met. Worship does bless us in many ways, but it should point us to God.

God created all that exists, called the people of Israel, sent Christ to us, gives us the Holy Spirit, and works for the redemption of the creation. In the words of Hebrews, "By faith we understand that the universe has been created by a word from God so that the visible came into existence from the invisible" (Hebrews 11:3).

These transcendent themes can raise our sights beyond our disputes and disagreements. God's transcendence can empower us to keep going when our energy fails. In worship, we can lose ourselves in the grandeur, mystery, and wonder of God.

Worship reminds us of God's claim on us. Through the Holy Spirit, God called the church into existence. God has identified our mission as the salt and the light (Matthew 5:13-14). The church is a witness and a force for redemption in the world. If God has called us to serve as the salt and the light, we model for the world a way of reconciliation. We find the resources to keep our saltiness when anything threatens to make us lose it.

Worship connects us to a church that, through its history, has survived conflict and hardship. Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, "Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me" (Matthew 5:11).

The church has split many times and endured defections, but it has kept going. Our history shows us that we cannot always work out our disagreements, but we can find endurance in knowing that God continues to work through the church. When we recite the ancient creeds and sing centuries-old songs, we connect to the history of the church and remember its resilience.

Worship can include components that promote reconciliation and endurance. Passing the peace can be more than a simple greeting. It can encourage worshipers to seek true fellowship beyond conflict. Prayers of confession can remind us that we are not perfect when we accuse others of sin. The sacrament of Communion can become a means of promoting fellowship and commitment to

one another.

When I wrote this lesson and now as you read it, no one knows what will happen at the next General Conference and how that will affect the future of the denomination. Several important issues remain unresolved, and in whatever ways that happens, many details will need to be worked out. The problems in our denomination remind us that church conflict has multiple layers. Worship alone cannot bind the denomination together.

I hope, however, that worship can lift us beyond what divides us to see some unity as the church of Jesus Christ. One of my seminary professors said that the only creed that unites all Christians is "Jesus is Lord." Can the lordship of Jesus give us some sense of unity, even if we cannot stay together as a denomination?

Church conflicts and defections are inevitable. If different denominations can come together at Thanksgiving or around Easter to worship together, we at least have some common ground. Worship and service seem to be the only things that churches can do together, even if they disagree on doctrine or social/ethical issues. If we cannot overcome our disagreements, perhaps we can sing praises to God as God's church.

In one of my churches, before I arrived, the congregation had to let the choir director go due to a medical condition that interfered with the ability to perform the job. The person, deeply hurt by this, was a member of the congregation and contemplated leaving the church. The choir director told me that the deciding factor in staying was, "This is my church, and I'm not leaving." That choir director continued to sing in the choir and play piano when needed. May something of that spirit help us to stay in individual churches and for churches to find some sense of unity beyond our differences.

When have you experienced worship as a means of connecting to other members of the congregation? When have you experienced worship helping to overcome divisions? When have you experienced worship giving you the endurance to continue when you felt like quitting?

Which parts of worship help you experience the transcendence of God? How do they do that?

We thank you, O God, for all that happens in worship. We thank you for calling us as the church and giving us the mission of being salt and light. May we encourage one another to continue to meet, to continue to be the church, and to claim our role in the world; in the name of Jesus. Amen.

From "Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore," by Steve McSwain, *The Huffington Post* (October 14, 2013) (huffpost.com/entry/why-nobody-wants-to-go-to_b_4086016) and "the Rise of the Dones: the 'Done With Church' Population," by Thom Schultz (February 23, 2019) (churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/177144-thom-schultz-rise-of-the-done-with-church-population.html).

*From *Matthew*, by O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Fortress Press, 2013); page 185.