

Sermon

Sept 7, 2008

Text: Matt 18:15-20

The words attributed to Jesus in our Gospel text for today certainly don't sound like him. He says that if your brother or sister sins against you, talk to them; if they won't listen, take one or two witnesses and try again; if that still doesn't work, then tell the whole church; and if even then the other member won't listen, Jesus says, "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." In Jesus' day, of course, "good," "upright" people didn't associate with Gentiles and tax collectors, but shunned them. So apparently Jesus is saying that if a member of the church doesn't recognize his or her sin, then it is necessary to stay away from them.

But that doesn't sound like Jesus. Didn't Jesus eat and drink with Gentiles and tax collectors instead of condemning them and avoiding them? And doesn't Jesus teach us that we should always forgive others? Next Sunday, in fact, in the passage immediately following this one, we will read how he says that one should forgive others not just seven times, but seventy times seven. So is Jesus teaching here that we shouldn't forgive? Aren't we *always* supposed to forgive?

Well, it all depends on what you mean by forgive. If forgiveness means not holding grudges, not seeking revenge, or not trying to get back at people when they do something that unjustly hurts you, then yes, we should always forgive. But the reality is that we often do things that harm others, whether intentionally or not. And when that happens, especially when it happens repeatedly, it's not good simply to overlook what's going on. Because then the person who is doing harm to others keeps doing it, and by ignoring or overlooking the problem, we end up contributing to it, because the harmful behavior keeps happening and nobody does anything to stop it. And that's not good for anybody.

That's why Jesus says that when someone is hurting others, it's important to point it out to them, but first to do so personally and privately. The objective is not to make that person look bad in front of others or judge them, but to clear things up, and hopefully put an end to any harmful behavior. Jesus says, "If that person listens to you, you have gained back your sister or brother." That's the goal: to restore harmony and wholeness. If that doesn't work, however, then you have to try to address the problem in the presence of a couple of others, and if the desired result still doesn't take place, Jesus says to deal with it out in the open, publicly. That doesn't represent a lack of love or a desire to hurt the person who is harming others; on the contrary, it's about seeking what is best not only for those who are being hurt but for the person who is practicing the harmful behavior, because that's not good for them, either.

You know, what Jesus is talking about here is applicable not just in the church but in all of our relationships. One of the most basic principles of the Christian life is that we never act out of malice to do anything to intentionally harm others. At times, it is not only acceptable but necessary to get angry, to point out injustices, to say that certain behavior is simply unacceptable and will not be tolerated and that it must therefore come to an end. To do that is to act out of love, that is, out of concern for the well-being of all. That may happen in our relationship with our spouse or loved ones, or in other contexts. When something is wrong and is hurting someone, we must point it out. But that doesn't mean

that one person becomes the judge of others. That's why it's so important first to talk to the other person privately, face-to-face, in the hope of clearing things up, rather than commenting about it with others. When that doesn't work, however, by bringing other people into the conversation, we are able to gain other perspectives and see exactly what is wrong, who is at fault, and what needs to be done to correct things so that people stop hurting others as well as themselves.

And just as we attempt to point out and deal with the behavior of others when it harms people, so also do we want others to help us by pointing out our own behavior when it's harmful to others. As Christians, all of us should be committed to avoiding any behavior that hurts others, and so when that's happening as a result of our own behavior, we ourselves should want to know about it so we can put a stop to it.

When we can learn to work through problems and conflicts like that, in our family relationships, our inter-personal relationships, and our relationships here in church and in other settings, then there can be peace together with justice. The two go hand-in-hand. We learn to see things for what they are, to point out what is wrong and work together to correct it. And when that happens, God is truly present. It is in that context that Jesus' words in our gospel should be understood: Where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there in the midst of them. Wherever we are with others seeking what is right and making an effort to identify and correct what is wrong, there is Jesus.

So that's what Jesus was talking about in our gospel lesson for today. He isn't saying not to forgive. Rather, he's saying that it never does anybody any good to simply ignore or overlook behavior that harms people. Point it out, and encourage others to point it out to you if you are the one doing something that harms others. Deal with the problem confidentially, looking for a solution rather than trying to make others look bad. If that doesn't resolve the problem, work with others in seeking a solution; and of course, if that still doesn't work, then some difficult decisions must be made. Yet even these difficult decisions must be taken out of concern for the good of all. At times, that may involve staying away from others when they continue to persist in doing things that harm others, as Jesus teaches. Of course, that is a last resort. But even then, we must never stop loving that person and doing everything possible to help him or her change.

To love someone means not accepting harmful behavior, whether it be in others or in ourselves. Real love means working to identify it, resolve it, and overcome it. That is what Jesus wants for us, for the good of all. That's what real love is about. Amen.