

When Two or Three are Gathered

Proper 18, Year A – Matthew 18:15-20

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, September 7, 2014 (8 only)

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Oh, I have heard this morning's Gospel lesson used in some really interesting ways. A lot of folks look at this text and say, "Aha! Here we have it. A biblically approved method for dealing with problem people in our church." Let's see, if you have someone who's a problem, first you go to him one-on-one and point out his problem. If he doesn't come around, you take a couple witnesses *with* you to confront her. If she still doesn't come around, you announce the whole mess in front of the entire congregation. And if he's still obstinate, you treat him like an outsider. Clear enough. *Finally*, a means to provide a little discipline within the Christian community. A cut-and-dried checklist for dealing with sinners that have somehow found their way into the midst of the faithful.

My father used to tell a story about a preacher who was using this morning's Gospel lesson as his text one Sunday morning at Ludlow Falls Camp Meeting. I've told you before that I didn't grow up in the Episcopal Church. And I think I've spoken about Ludlow Falls before, as well.

The main meeting hall at the camping ground, called the Tabernacle after the Israelite's tent in the wilderness, was a huge affair that during summer camp meetings sat maybe six or seven hundred people in hot, sticky discomfort. The ventilation system consisted of big windows that were held open by huge hooks, a humongous fan in the rafters that was turned off during the service because it made so much noise, and popsicle stick paper fans. You know the ones, on one side a picture of Jesus in the Garden, or Jesus knocking at the door of your heart, and on the other, an ad for one of the funeral homes. The young people who were part of the week long youth camp occupied the center section, right up front where everyone could keep their eyes on them. The rest of the area was available to anyone else, though people usually tended to congregate with others from their home church.

The only other reserved seating was the area down front on the far right hand side, the area occupied by the group of women, mostly widows, who made up the unofficial cheering section. Every meeting, there they were, dressed in their finest despite the heat, funeral home fans in one hand, and in the other, little lacy white hankies. Sometimes they would wipe a brow or dab a tear. But mostly the hankies were for waving. The rest of the congregation would respond vigorously to the preaching at the Ludlow Falls Camp Meeting. If you agreed with a particular point in the sermon, you were not expected to keep that fact to yourself. I told you, we *weren't* Episcopalians. There was always a chorus of "Amen's" and other exclamations throughout the preaching. But the greatest level of such excitement was always from those ladies we generally called the "Amen corner." And the hankie wave was practically *reserved* for their exclusive use.

Anyway, on the Sunday morning in my Daddy's story, the preacher started in talking about the nature of sin within the body of the faithful, and what we were to do about it. As the sermon progressed, the preacher got more impassioned, and the responses, especially from the right-side-front, got more vigorous. When the preacher asserted that the *liar* should be challenged with the gravity of his sin, they called out, "Amen, brother!" When the preacher exclaimed that the *thief* should be confronted with the evil of his ways, they raised their hands and shouted, "Preach it, Reverend!" And when the preacher thundered that the one who in his heart and in his eyes, harbors the sin of *lust*, should have his vileness laid clearly before him, the ladies on the front row feverishly waved their hankies, and nearly screamed, "Tell it, Preacher! Amen!" Then the preacher went on, to declare that the *gossip* should be exhorted to hold her tongue, and the front row suddenly went quiet, as every hanky dropped from view. As the preacher moved on to the rest of his fine three-point sermon, My Daddy concluded, one of the ladies turned to another, and said, "Now he's quit preaching gone to just meddling'."

The biggest problem with taking apart this morning's text from Matthew, and using it as a formula for excluding sinners, is that it has a nasty tendency to let *us* be the aggrieved party, and everyone *else* the sinner. It's awfully easy for us to self-righteously claim that we have a scriptural duty to root out the problem people from among us, and never turn an eye on our *own* sinful nature. We become spiritual vigilantes, bent on bringing everyone else's problems into the bright light of public view, stirring up strife, and building walls of resentment, while letting our own faults fester and stew in the dark.

Or maybe we decide to streamline the process a bit, and simply skip a step or two. Maybe it's better to just go ahead and bring a couple of extra people into the mix right off. Let them in on what's *really* been going on. Better yet skip that step too, and see just how *many* people we can get properly informed, nattering and gossiping until what really belongs on the altar of repentance is a tongue that's a mile wide and three times as long.

Or maybe we do our disciplining with our feet. "I didn't like what so and so said last Sunday, so I'm not coming anymore." "The Vestry didn't make the decision I would have made, so I'll drop my pledge this year." We separate *ourselves*, rather than continue in association with all those ones with the problems.

The difficulty with all this attitude of discipline, is that we utterly fail to see that what this lesson is really *about* is *reconciliation*. In the rush to grab onto discipline, we each end up being our *own* authority. We end up being our *own* arbiter. We each end up being a community... of *one*. No, the person sitting next to you is not perfect. They're probably not even as close to perfect as you'd *like* them to be. Lord knows, the person standing in the pulpit is nowhere *near* perfect. But the same holds true for the person sitting in *your* seat.

What Jesus was after is not a group of perfect *individuals*, but a *community* of sinners, saved by the grace of God alone, bound together not by our grievances, but by our mutual love for Christ. When Christ is the *focus* of our common life, questions of discipline somehow fade into the background. When Christ is the focus of our *community*, the definition of wronged and wronging parties becomes somehow *far* less important. When Christ is the focus of our relationship with *one another*, we can hear with assurance the words with which Jesus closes this morning's reading, "When two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them." We can claim that as a promise, sure and certain. We can claim it as our own *truth*. And we can live a life *together* filled with freedom, a life filled with power, a life filled with *love*. A life *filled*, not with ourselves, but with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.