

**Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish**  
**Saint Francisville, LA**  
**10 August 2017**

**Matthew 18: 15-20**

*Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*

You will find what I am about to do very strange indeed. Preaching from the nave is just something we don't do here, especially when we have such a beautiful and historic pulpit. The explanation for my behavior is rather simple. When I was in Ireland, I had the opportunity to preach from the nave at one of the churches and I liked it a great deal. Not having a place to put my text forces me to be more natural, to just speak to you about what's in my heart and in my mind. It allows me to connect more with you all.

Let me start by telling you a story of the small Church of Ireland church in Killorglin, County Kerry. But, let me frame the story with a bit of context. As you all know, the history of Christianity in Ireland has been marked by centuries of conflicts between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Catholics still remember vividly the destruction caused by Oliver Cromwell in the 1600's, which Church of Ireland people still remember the pain of being the minority church in a country that is still mostly Roman Catholic. There are many books and stories about the mistrust and outright hostility between the two groups and, of course, many of you remember the conflicts in Northern Ireland, just a few years ago. In many ways both Protestant and Catholic churches were visible reminders of centuries of pain and violence in the name of religion.

And, it is because of this history that what happened in Killorglin a bit over 30 years ago is so remarkable. The congregation decided to sell their old church because it had been built on an incline and it was difficult for older people to walk up to, it had no car park on the premises, and it was in need of costly restoration. With the money obtained in the sale, the church bought a beautiful piece of land near the local library on flat ground. The new space would allow for parking and easy access for all. The problem was that the returns from the sale would not be sufficient to build a church and parking lot without incurring major debt. This is when the story becomes remarkable. At some point, the Roman Catholic Church began to fundraise and contributed generously to the building of the Church of Ireland sanctuary. This incredible gesture created such spirit of gratitude and love in the Church that many began to see the Catholics as partners in ministry and friends. On the

other hand, for Catholics, the new church was a symbol of unity and not a reminder of past grievances and pain. Suddenly, the church became a symbol of unity and love.

This great story is very appropriate when we discuss the gospel for today. We are in Matthew, Chapter 18, which is the fourth sermon Matthew adds to the gospel of Mark. When writing his Gospel, Matthew uses about 90% of Mark and introduces 5 sections at various places when he felt Mark left something important out. Chapter 18 is all about life in community. It begins with a quarrel between the disciples about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus takes a small child and tells them, “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (18:4). The disciples are to be humble and they are to make sure they don’t cause “little ones” (the young, those just coming into the church, the disenfranchised...) to stumble. He says, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (18:6). After this describes the kind of concern the disciples are to have for these little ones. he tells them the story of the shepherd who leaves the 99 behind to search for the wayward lamb until he finds it. Later he will give them a mandate to forgive without ceasing every time someone sins and repents of their sin. He drives this point home by telling them the story of the unforgiving servant. But, before he gets to this parable on forgiveness, he gives them instructions to deal with church discipline.

He starts the section by saying, “If another member of the church[d] sins against you...” So, from the start we know this is about conflict within the church. Jesus knew that the church, formed as it is by human beings, would eventually have to deal with internal divisions and conflict. I have a problem with this sentence’s translation, however. The original language uses *adelphoi*. “When brothers and sisters sin against you...” I like this better because it is drastically different to deal with an offense from a member of the church than to deal with an offense from a brother and a sister. When a member of the church offends you, many just switch church services, seat far a part from the offending member, and, if it becomes overly uncomfortable, they switch churches. Few would challenge the fellow church members. It is just as easy to ignore them and avoid them.

When family offends you, it is not as easy to move out of town or to just stop talking to them. This was specially the case in small communities in First Century Palestine. Sometimes your very survival depended on your family and extended relatives. You could not afford to be mad at them for two long. You must do all in your power to reconcile promptly. In Christ, according to Matthew, we are all brothers and sisters. Not just acquaintances we see on Sundays. Truly brothers and sisters and what happens to one affects the whole. But, overlooking the translation problem, let us talk about the process Jesus describes when there is conflict within the church.

First you are to talk to the person on a one to one, confidential setting. Most conflicts would end then. If somehow, the conflict did not end, you were to bring two or three persons from the church. This requirements has Levitical roots. Jewish Law requires at least two witnesses before a person can be found guilty. The purpose of the witnesses, however,

is not to gang up against the accused, as we sometimes do in interventions with alcoholics. The purpose was to listen to both parties impartially and try to mediate among the two. Sometimes the witnesses would side with the accused and convince the accuser about the errors of his perception, understanding, or facts. This is done to provide proper care to both sides. If this does not work, the case was to be brought to the whole church and if the accused failed to ask for forgiveness and perhaps engage in some form of restoration, that person is to be treated “as a Gentile and a tax collector.” In other words, the person would be expelled from the church.

This sounds harsh, but in fact, once the church passed judgement, a great deal of pastoral care was provided to the guilty person. If willing, this person could enter a period of penance and spiritual work, which included meetings with a designated member of the church for prayer and counseling. After the process was completed, the sinner was reconciled to the church at the Easter Vigil when the sinner, dressed in white, would be welcome back into the church with the Catechumens that joined the church at the baptismal liturgy. At this point, there was great celebration and reconciliation.

My brothers and sisters, the unity of the church is very important and we all must do all we can to correct each other in ways that build our faith and strengthen the bonds of affection between members. It saddens me when I see good Christians suing each other in civilian courts, sometimes without having a personal conversation with the other person. It also saddens me when we bottle things up, become bitter, and end up leaving the church. In the process Christ gives us there is ample opportunity for forgiveness, restoration, and love. It is work that must be seen as the work of brothers and sisters. People with deep roots in the fertile soil of this church, people with a common history, people who believe in a generous and gracious God who sent his Son into the world to reconcile the whole world to himself.

There are no perfect churches and we know that conflict is inevitable, but today Christ invites us to talk to each other and not to talk about each other. To resolve issues in love and not to repress them and harbor internal hatred for the other. Matthew ends this passage with a promise. Where two or three gather together to engage in the work of reconciliation, Jesus himself is among them. With his help and guidance, forgiveness and love are possible. We saw this in Killorglin where people chose to forgive historic hurts and grievances and join together in mission to build a church. This same type of forgiveness and reconciliation is possible among us. May God continue to guide you into deeper love. Amen!