

Matthew 18:15-20

I know that watching online as opposed to participating in person shortens our attention spans, so I'm just going to briefly lift up six details to think about from this passage and then get us thinking in the direction the lectionary will be taking us in the next couple weeks.

1: Before the church was ever established, Jesus expected that members of it would sin and would hurt one another. That's not what Jesus desires for the church, but it at least should not be a surprising thing when that happens: church people are not immune to sinning against each other.

2: Jesus' concern in this passage is specifically for when a sibling in Christ *sins* against someone else. *Sinning* against someone is different from simply disagreeing with them. Any time two or more people are gathered together, there will eventually be conflict; but not all conflict is bad or is sinful. The reading from Romans helps us here: *the commandments are summed up in this word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* and *Love does not wrong to a neighbor*. When Jesus talks about sinning, he's talking about breaking that commandment.

3 Jesus requires his disciples to take multiple steps to try to reconcile with someone who has done something harmful. First one on one, then with someone to help mediate, then with a larger group. But every step of the process is in pursuit of reconciliation and a restored relationship.

4: Just as Jesus expected that people would sin, Jesus expected that people would refuse to take responsibility for the hurt that they caused. And when that happens, our relationship with those people changes. *Let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector*—that is, separate from the rest of the community.

5: However, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus still heals and feeds gentiles and befriends and dines with tax collectors. So we don't get to be nasty, even to someone who refuses to reconcile with us or someone who chooses to step outside of the community of the church.

6: Jesus comforts us by promising to be with us even in a group as small as two or three...but at the same time, Jesus challenges us by that promise, because sometimes we don't speak and act towards other people as if Jesus were present. If we wouldn't say it or do it in front of Jesus, it's probably not something we should say or do to someone at all.

In this passage and the readings from Matthew's gospel for the next couple of weeks, Jesus is going to instruct us to treat each other with persistent love and mercy, even when we have not been treated very lovingly or mercifully by others. When we are hurt, as we surely will be sometimes, we are called to come back together instead of turning a cold shoulder and to seek reconciliation instead of vengeance. Responding with grace to those who hurt us and doing the hard work of repairing broken relationships—that is not the value system the rest of the world teaches. That's why Jesus was able to say, as the old camp song goes, *They will know we are Christians by our love*. Even when we have been wronged, may God help us speak and act so that those around us do know us—and through us, know Christ—by our love.