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Lesson: Matthew 18:15-20

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<sup>15</sup>"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. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

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This is one of those gospel passages that at first glance is ho-hum. Nothing special is going on in it, like Jesus walking on water or healing someone. Nothing is truly revealed about heaven to inspire us; in fact, when Jesus says today that whatever we bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what is loosed on earth will be loosed in heaven, it should sound familiar... because he said the same thing just a couple of weeks ago. Today's lesson is some instructions on how members of a church should handle conflict with a member, and I believe there is still good news in these words.

First of all, it's interesting to note from this passage that Jesus has the baseline assumption that conflict within the Christian community is normal and natural. It is safe to say that anyone who has ever invested their time in the church has had their toes stepped on or at least experienced disappointment with the community. This conflict is a normal and natural outcome of putting humans together in a community. Conflict is a part of life. And because we can only be the church together, conflict is a part of faith too. Often we hold the church up to a higher standard, so we may be disappointed when conflict does arise. However, the higher standards the church should be known for is how we work through these natural conflicts. Jesus instructs us that we should work through this conflict with honesty and with compassion.

Here's a bit of trivia-knowledge for you: our gospel passage today is the only part of scripture that is included in the model-constitution of ELCA congregations. It appears in the section about the steps to be undertaken if a member willfully is causing problems. Before any actions of discipline are taken, the constitution says that reconciliation and repentance will be attempted using the model of today's gospel lesson. That's because reconciliation through honesty and compassion is a good thing for the congregation and all parties involved. Working toward this reconciliation is the high standard that Jesus sets for his church.

First, we are to seek direct and respectful communication. We are neither to talk behind the person's back nor seek a dramatic public confrontation with them. If more work is needed from there, we move on to gradually include other members of the church to help us reconcile and forgive. Ultimately, if none of that works, Jesus says, "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Jesus uses some subtle irony there. In that society, everyone would shun and cast aside Gentiles and tax

collectors. Everyone, that is, except for Jesus. What did Jesus do with them? Oh, let's see... he sought them out, he spoke with them, he supped with them, he healed them, and he even invited them to be his disciples. "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" means that we still have some hard work ahead of us. It means we do not give up on the person. Why? Because as stubborn as you and I are, Jesus has never given up on us. That sets a high standard for us, but it is the path that Jesus set down for us to follow so that our human reconciliation can be a window to the divine reconciliation that God does with and through us.

The gospel of Matthew has a parable immediately prior to the passage we read today. It is the parable of the lost sheep. You know, a shepherd has 100 but one gets lost, so the shepherd seeks him out and finds that sheep to bring it back to the fold. Luke's gospel also includes this parable, but the framing of Luke's version indicates that the main takeaway is that God seeks out the outcasts of society and the ones who feel that God could never love them. That is good news, and I don't want to diminish it. Matthew frames the parable differently, however, by placing it with today's lesson. The takeaway from Matthew's version is that God is always doing the work of reconciling someone to the community of faith. God seeks out that lost person and through compassionate forgiveness and honest repentance, the community is whole once again.

The final verse today -- "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" -- drives that point home. This verse is often said to acknowledge God's presence in a small gathering, which is true. But the point Jesus was making is that when the church engages in compassionate and honest reconciliation with a member who has strayed, it is acknowledging that none of us are alone in this task,

because Jesus is leading this work. So when Jesus says he is present whenever two or three are gathered, it serves a twofold purpose during difficult conversations: it is a comforting promise of Christ's presence during the often difficult reconciliation process, and it is equally also a preventive reminder for us all to not blow our lid.

The reconciliation process is difficult, but Jesus has given us all this path so we can love another, even when we don't want to. It's about loving the other enough to talk about their behavior and to offer them help to find ways of changing it. It's about having a willingness to forgive., and to forgive., and to forgive again until reconciliation has been made.

These instructions today are especially important when so much is going on around us that induces stress. We all have our limits on what we can handle before the less desirable aspects of our character are manifested. So when that happens, remember that God freely offers a method of forgiveness and reconciliation that happens through similarly flawed people who are collectively called the church. The likes of us are forgiven, and therefore we are forgiving.

Here's the clincher of it all: this is not an option. Being forgiving people is what we do as Christians; this is simply who we are. Jesus formed us to be a community of forgiveness, so that our pattern of reconciliation can be a beacon of light to the world. The world is supposed to be enamored by our ability to reconcile. Even though it has its own rough patches and imperfections, the church is exactly where you are called to be. You are called to be here because it is here that we do the hard work of embodying for one another – and for the world – the love, grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation that Christ first embodied for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.