



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 19th March 2023, Lent 4

Learning to forgive

Gospel reading: *Matthew 18:10-20*

“Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, 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 that person 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.”

We continue this week in Matthew chapter 18 with the cross before us. We were reminded in the children's address that the dominant theme of the chapter is a little child. It's in response to the question of the disciples: *who will be the greatest?*

In our reading today, we get a bit more information about who is little. The little ones, it appears, are the ones who find themselves on the fringes of the community because of some event that's taken place. The one sheep who wanders from the ninety-nine. The outcast, the one who doesn't fit.

And the term "little ones" takes on negative connotations. It's pejoratively used for someone who has sinned against the community. Someone who has committed wrongdoing and consequently finds himself on the fringes of the community.

Matthew goes on to give some very practical advice on how to bring the lost sheep back into the fold. Matthew doesn't dwell on the wrongdoing. The goal is forgiveness, reconciliation, healed relationship. That's what he's interested in. That's what a community of the cross is about.

It sounds good, but... this passage of scripture which we heard today is single-handedly responsible for doing *huge* damage throughout the history of the church. And I want to explore a little today about why that is, about why I think the church has tended to misinterpret this passage, and what I think a more faithful interpretation would be.

So let's go over the advice that Matthew gives. First, he says, when someone sins against you, you go and point out the fault to them one-on-one. And if that doesn't work, you try again. But this time, you take a friend or two with you as witnesses. And you confront them again with their sin. And if *that* doesn't work, well then you haul them publicly before the church, probably the eldership, and confront them once more. And if at this point, they still don't listen... well, you've done what you can. The only thing left, regrettably, is to treat them like a... *gentile* and *tax collector*.

...which the church has tended to interpret as effectively disowning them from the community... with regrets of course.

The traditional interpretation paints the little one uncritically as the sinner, the wrongdoer. And so, you confront the person with their sin with increasing degrees of seriousness until eventually you give up on them.

Now I have a number of problems with this interpretation. And I want to explain why I think this interpretation is so wrong. You may disagree with me and that's fine. I'd love to engage with you afterwards.

Firstly, in my experience, people don't tend to respond particularly well when you go in and accuse them of wrongdoing. At least when someone does that to me, I tend to get defensive. In fact, I actively have to resist the urge to get defensive. (By the way, I get this way when people criticise my sermons... a word to the wise :-))

It's hard enough to hear criticism one-on-one, but the second step of being confronted by three or four can easily feel like you're being ganged up on. The third step ...where you're hauled before a whole group and your dirty laundry is exposed... it's hard to imagine that experience being anything other than deeply, deeply shameful. Deeply scarring. Deeply embarrassing. In a way that you'd never want to step foot inside the church again.

So that's my first reason. My second reason is this. That the traditional interpretation assumes uncritically that the little one who sinned is in the wrong, while the one who was sinned against is in the right. To be fair, that's kind of there in Matthew's text. So, it's a legitimate reading.

But again, in my experience, there's almost always two sides to every story. And there's almost always wider context as to why someone has behaved the way they have.

Sometimes, when someone has hurt me, they may not even realise it. And I'm holding onto this hurt that they're never going to apologise for because they don't know there's anything to apologise for in the first place!

And other times, they may know they've hurt me. But they acted that way *because I hurt them first*, and I didn't realise. There's a wonderful podcast by Rev. Malcolm Gordon, which I publicised in the weekly email, called "A Field Guide to Forgiveness". And he explores exactly this dynamic. I recommend giving it a listen.

All that to say, that the traditional interpretation of this passage doesn't allow much space for nuance.

But the biggest red flag for me that the church has tended to interpret this passage wrong, is that the one on the margins, the one who "sinned", Matthew calls the "little one". Remember the term relates to power dynamics. It's a relational term. And at the beginning of the chapter, Jesus talks about little ones very positively.

In other words, in this scenario, regardless of what they've done, the little one is the one who relationally finds themselves on the outside, on the margins of the community, on the edge, separated from the ninety-nine. It's ninety-nine who have the power in this scenario.

And tragically, historically, the church has done little to reflect on its own power and the imbalance it creates when pursuing forgiveness and healed relationship. Remember that's the goal for Matthew.

We've seen, I think, throughout history, how the church has wielded huge power to detrimental and catastrophic effect. The Reformation was a protest against the power abuses of the Roman Catholic Church at the time.

And surprise, surprise, the Roman Catholic Church used this passage in Matthew 18 as a defence for their power. In particular this verse here:

"whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

This verse has done monumental damage.

The interpretation has been that if the church disowns you, then God disowns you. If the church withholds forgiveness, then forgiveness is withheld from you in heaven itself. It was called the office of the keys, which is why Peter is always depicted with keys in art.

That's terrifying power. Isn't it?

And rightly so, the Reformers protested against such power abuse. But we didn't get things right either. Presbyterians were some of the worst for draconian church discipline, which often included public shaming. We were known as the moralists, the "fun police".

Looking back at our history, we can see so clearly how wrong the church has been. How power has been abused. How the little ones have been cruelly exposed. All that to say that I find the traditional interpretation of discipline in the church (based on this passage in Matthew) to be deeply problematic.

I certainly wouldn't back myself to be on the side of right. And I wouldn't want the responsibility of making that call.

...there's a different way to interpret things though. Remember Jesus invites us not only to welcome little ones, but to become little ourselves. Something happens when we become little.

We can imagine this in a very visual, literal way. When you become little, it means you're no longer looking *down* on someone, assuming that you're right and they're wrong. You're forced to engage with them as equals. To dignify and honour them by listening to them and seeking to hear things from their perspective. And in doing so, we open ourselves up to a different point of view and to finding a way forward together.

All that to say, the way I choose to interpret this passage is through the lens of becoming little. The goal for Matthew – and I would argue for any community shaped by the reconciling power of the cross – is forgiveness, healed relationship. And a key part of that healing, involves becoming little together. Coming down to one another's level.

There will always be wrongdoing in every community. There always be hurt. The question is what we do with that. As individuals and as a community.

I want to finish with this final thought. There are obviously times when relationship is irreparably broken. When reconciliation may not be possible. At least this side of the grave. When forgiveness remains elusive.

But to be followers of Christ, to be a community of the cross, means to never stop hoping that forgiveness and reconciliation is possible. Because guess where God is in all of this?

In Christ, God is with the little one. Christ is the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to search out the lost one and will never stop searching until the lost one is found.

Our reading finishes rather ominously with the instruction that, if someone doesn't listen, to treat them like a gentile and tax collector ... but guess who it was that Jesus hung out with?

There's a challenge there that Christ is with the other. And that to follow him is to pursue reconciliation, to pursue healing, to pursue grace, never ceasing to believe that the Spirit is drawing us together in communion with Christ who will be all in all.

Amen.