

Pentecost 14

***I'm Repeating Myself***

September 10, 2017

Christ the King, Kenner

Texts: Matthew 18:15-20 & Romans 13:8-14

Our bishop likes to send out his comments on the readings for each Sunday. Here's what he wrote this past week about the Gospel Reading we just heard: *"Every pastor should preach this text every time it comes up in the lectionary. It only comes up every three years. Perhaps this should be an annual sermon."*

Why? He goes on. Because *this "is not how most communities function. Therefore you have to teach this. It's counter-cultural. When someone sins against them, most people tell everyone else, except the very person that offended them. 'Do you know what so-and-so did to me/said to me? Well, let me tell you! Isn't it awful?'"*

There are about 120 congregations in our TX-LA Gulfcoast Synod. So besides personally helping with the mopping up after hurricanes, the bishop always seems to have a bunch of fires to put out at churches in conflict. And the conflict usually arises because this procedure our Lord specifies in Matthew 18 has been ignored. So we could all save the bishop a lot of time and inconvenience by simply doing what Jesus tells us to. And, come to think of it, wouldn't that solve everything in life!

So, in humble obedience to his grace (I'm talking about the bishop now), this is the second time I've preached on this text at Christ the King.

I'm repeating myself. And because folks like easy-to-follow outlines, here is the 4-step process from our Lord (I'm talking about Jesus now):

1. If someone sins against you (i.e. offends you in some way), go and talk to that person privately. Jesus says it's the one who's been offended who needs to take the initiative. After all, the offender might not even be aware of how he's hurt you.

And usually, especially if it's been a mere misunderstanding, it's settled right then and there. But even if it was a more conscious, deliberate act, the two of you talking it through will usually lead to reconciliation, and that's the objective, always within the Christian community, reconciliation. The Christian life is about forgiveness, compassion and reconciliation. We interact not to humiliate, but to heal.

And it's then been achieved before anybody else has been dragged into it. Talking to others is what psychologists call "triangulating," complaining to a third party without first trying to work it out between the two of you.

So, and this is really important, you can prevent yourself from being dragged into a triangle by asking the offended party if he or she has first spoken to the one who caused him or her hurt. If not, encourage him to do that and refuse to hear it until that's first been tried.

These days we need to add that there are some exceptions to this procedure. E.g. cases of physical abuse or rape when safety becomes a priority and the police need to be brought in.

But in most instances, the next step is this:

2. If the person who's offended or sinned against you, won't listen to you, then take one or two others along. They'll be witnesses, not in some legal sense, but they can help you both see if there's been a misunderstanding, or something they can help clarify by careful listening.
3. If that doesn't work, Jesus says, take it to the church. Remember that churches in the first century were house churches which met in people's homes, so we're not talking about calling a full-scale congregational meeting, but a rather small, loving fellowship of folks who know each other well.
4. And, finally, if that doesn't help, regard the offender as you would a "Gentile or a tax collector," Jesus says.

What does that mean? Kick him out? Excommunicate her? Some have misinterpreted it that way. No, it means this person who won't confess his sin, won't repent of the harm he's done, and isn't interested in being reconciled to the one who's been hurt, should be put high on your mission list, because he needs to be re-evangelized.

Remember, the only one who recorded this command of Jesus, Matthew, had himself been a much-despised tax collector (because of his dealings with the Romans including kick-backs). So the offending party shouldn't be regarded as an outcast, but as someone in need of being restored to Christian community. That's always the objective.

This process of conflict management is so important to the peace and well-being of the Christian church that it is included in the constitution of every congregation in the ELCA, including ours.

And chances are that the bishop will urge pastors to preach on this text again three years from now.

But that's when we'll also hear that wonderful passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, in which he tells us, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." That's all. But, of course, that's everything. Paul even goes on to say, "Love is the fulfilling of the law." He says, "the commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal and all the others are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'"(Romans 13:8-14).

I've titled this sermon, "I'm Repeating Myself," and blaming it on the bishop.

But you know that I and most Christian preachers repeat ourselves every week, don't we, because we anchor our sermons in the good news of Jesus Christ. He's the one, after all, who, out of love for us, has

brought about our reconciliation to God the Father through his death and resurrection. That's the extent to which he went, taking the initiative, to forgive our sins, our many offenses. And he wants that love, that gracious compassion, evident among his followers.

Next week's Gospel Reading picks up on this same theme as Jesus answers Peter's question, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

And Jesus' response, like all of our Lord's words, also bears repeating.