

Scripture:

Matthew 18:15-20

“Christian community.”

At first glance our passage from Matthew’s gospel today reads more like checklist of things to do.

A series of hoops to walk through ----- in the event of sin ----- than it does gospel grace.

When an officer of the law enforces the law ---- arrests someone ----- there are certain things ---- certain steps that he or she must do in order for the charge to have any chances of being upheld ---- read them their rights for example.

It would appear --- if we read Matthew’s gospel passage in a certain way ---- --- that if someone sins against us ----- there are things we must do --- steps we must follow ---- in order to be true to the way of Jesus Christ.

Verse 15 ----- “go and show him his fault”.

Verse 16 --- “but if he will not listen, take one or two others along.”

Verse 17 ---- “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church”

And further along in verse 17 ----- “if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

4 steps on how to deal with sin ----- 4 steps as to what to do when there is conflict ---- disagreement ---- dissent in Christian community.

If we look at it this way there is a clear beginning and a definite end as to how to deal with sin.

There is a 4 step list we must walk and work through when faced with sin --- ---- conflict --- and disagreement.

A beginning step 1 --- and an end step 4.

Unfortunately to read this passage ---- or at least the first 3 verses this way --- limits its power and its beauty ----- its “Christness”.

If we consider this passage in the context of the whole of the gospel ---- we see that it means so much more than just ---- follow these 4 steps in instances of sin and conflict --- and you can lay your head down knowing you’ve done your due diligence as a Christian.

And even more precisely ---- if we even take the time to consider this passage in its immediate context in Matthew’s gospel --- there is a far richer and more compassionate path.

Just before our passage today in verses 10 to 14 of Matthew 18 ----- we quickly come to see that God cares about all His people ----- right down to the very last one.

After Jesus has told the disciples that if 1 out of a hundred sheep is lost --- the owner will seek out that last lost one and is not willing to lose it and settle for 99% ----- he cares passionately for that 1 single one ----- never giving up on it.

Verse 14 reads ---- “In the same way your father in heaven is not willing that any of these little one should be lost.”

“In the same way your father in heaven is not willing that any of these little one should be lost.”

Compassion ---- care --- grace --- mercy --- right down to the very last one.

God loves each and every person in the whole of creation.

He loves each and every one of us here today ----- not just 99% of us ---- 99 sheep out of a 100 isn’t enough.

He loves and knows and cares about each and every person --- 100% of his children and nothing less.

And then there is the passage immediately following ours for today.

The parable of the unmerciful servant ---- where when asked how many times one out to forgive another --- Jesus replies with “seventy-seven times.” ----- in other words many many many many many ----- more times than ever imagined.

Endless mercy --- grace ---- love ----- forgiveness.

Considered in the context of the gospel as a whole ----- and in light of its very specific context in Matthew’s gospel ----- there’s a whole lot more to forgiving sin ---- and living in Christian community in a Christ like way ----- than just walking through 4 steps.

Working through sin ---- conflict ---- disagreement.

Working through anything that causes any kind of separation or alienation -- --- in an authentic Christ informed and Christ like way ----- is far more about forgiveness ----- grace ---- mercy --- love and compassion ----- than it is about simply walking through a certain number of prescribed steps.

The powerful images of never giving up on ---- mercy --- forgiveness ---- grace ----- and restoration that we find in the gospel as a whole ---- and immediately surrounding this passage ----- inform and colour our understanding of it --- or at least ought to.

In the very last verse of our reading today ---- Jesus says this ---- “For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them.”

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In other words ----- I --- Christ am present whenever people gather in my name.

Including when they gather because of a sin --- including when they gather because of conflict or disagreement and so on ---- every time people gather in my name --- whatever the reason --- I am there.

God’s grace ----- God’s mercy ----- God’s love ----- God’s forgiveness -- ----- know no boundaries ----- there is no end to them --- so it ought to be with ours too.

Part of what it means to be a Christian community is to recognize and celebrate that God is everywhere --- God is wherever and whenever God so chooses.

His grace ----- and love ---- and mercy --- and forgiveness are everywhere -- -- and so our grace --- and our love ---- and our mercy and our forgiveness also ought to be evident everywhere too.

Including when there is conflict ---- and sin --- and tension --- and dissention ----- and disagreement.

That's a big part of what we're here for today isn't it ----- love --- grace --- mercy --- forgiveness.

It's rally day ----- it's kick off ---- it's ---“we're finally all back together again day.”

There's an excitement about this ----- we're re-connecting again ----- there's lots of food waiting for us ----- we've even got some cool new shirts ----- games for the kids and so on --- we're re-connecting again --- in worship ----- with food ---- in fellowship with games and so on.

Today is a day where we celebrate Christian community ----- specifically our Christian community ----- St. Andrew's in Whitby.

And at the heart of Christian community is a never ending --- never giving up ----- love ---- and grace and mercy ----- and forgiveness.

And it's easy to remember this today --- rally day --- kick off day ----- a happy day.

And it's awesome.

But we also have to model and live and celebrate this every day ----- even on the hard to do it days.

Love your neighbour as yourself is easy when all is great between you and your neighbour.

Love your neighbour as yourself is a whole lot harder when your neighbour has irritated you to no end.

Christian community isn't just built on follow these 4 --- or 10 or whatever steps ----- and all will be well --- or at the very least you've covered your behind and you can put your head down at night and feel good about yourself.

Christian community is about remembering that regardless of the context ---- happy and exciting days like rally day ----- or otherwise ----- stressful days - ----- tough decision days --- "...where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them."

And when Christ is here among us --- so too is His abundant grace --- mercy ----- love and forgiveness.

As many of you know I'm a big sports fan ----- and I often listen to the Fan 590 on the radio when I'm driving.

And if you listen to the Fan sooner or later you'll hear Bob McCown ----- the well ----- to say the least opinionated host of Prime Time Sports.

And sometime over the summer I was listening when Bob had just returned from a few weeks vacation and he talked about how even though he'd been hosting talk radio sports shows for over 20 years now every time he returns to his job from a vacation he always feels lost ---- and out of sorts for the first little bit.

He forgets where buttons were ----- he's slow to remember who was coming up next and so on --- things he does without thinking most of the time ----- and talked about how thankfully after only a very short while he settles in again always finds himself back at full speed --- in his groove..

And I thought ----hmmm---- I can relate.

So if you think the worship --- and specifically the sermon kind of stinks today ----- I'll just use the excuse that it's my first week back after vacation --- and like Bob McCown I too take a few days to get back in the groove again.

Anyhow the real reason I brought up this story ---- wasn't to create some slack for myself ----- although that might be helpful too ----- I brought it up because there's a little truth to it that I think is worth considering.

When we step away from ---- and remove ourselves from Christian community ---- we can become out of sorts --- out of rhythm ----- less faithful than we can be.

And just as we can quickly get back into the rhythm and sync of work after having been away for a bit ---- so too can we quickly get back into the rhythm and joys of life in a community of faith.

As Christians we are called to live in community --- specifically faith community ----- what we call a church community or church family --- God's team as our Sunday school is putting it today with their God's team shirts and theme.

And sometimes when we feel out of sync and lost a bit ---- what matters most is that we show up and be ready to love and forgive and show --- and live ---- and share mercy and grace --- specifically the saving mercy and grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Matthew 18 verses 15-20 --- read in the context of Matthew's gospel and the gospel of Jesus Christ as a whole reminds us that even though there is sometimes sin and conflict and disagreement in Christian community ----- God is still there.

And it also reminds us that the mark of a vibrant --- true --- authentic Christ centered community isn't a lack of sin necessarily ---- but grace ---- love --- mercy --- and forgiveness ---- in the face of sin.

Christian community is not primarily about performance --- or abilities --- or even gifts and their exercising and sharing.

At the most basic level Christian community is about gathering together ----- showing up ----- and being open to ---- and inviting ----- and encouraging Christ's presence and love and forgiveness and saving grace.

“For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them.”

When we gather in His name ----- focused on grace --- mercy ---- love and forgiveness ---- God's saving grace --- mercy --- love and forgiveness --- and not just out of some kind of completed check list of things that we feel we ought to do to be "good Christians" ----- then ---- and only then do we begin to live in authentic --- Christ centered ---- Christian community.

It's not by mistake that when Jesus talks about Christian community --- He also deals with things that get in the way and challenge of living out His love.

And specifically for our passage today --- Jesus doesn't just speak about personal failures or selfishness that can challenge Christian community -----
- He also focuses on what happens when someone else is the challenge.

Specifically what to do when our neighbour sins against us.

And as usual Jesus is clear --- and in this instance even gives direct guidance.

Go and talk about it.

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Don't gossip --- don't avenge ---- don't avoid --- don't stew over it -----
address it --- head on ---- talk about it.

Jesus counsels us to remember that in His love we are called to maintain relationship even when that relationship is put under the strain of sin and is challenged by disagreement.

Be merciful ---- be graceful --- love and forgive Jesus says ---- and go and talk about.

And if going and talking about it doesn't work ----- He basically says -----
try ----- and try ----- and try --- and try again ---- seventy times.

Meaning try over and over and over again ---- try more times than you ever planned on trying ----- try and try and try and try again and again.

And as you try again and again --- remember that you are not alone --- you are a part of a community ---- and so --- if necessary bring the community in on the conversation too --- ask others for help and guidance.

And if that still doesn't work then ----- the last words in verse 17 ----- "treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

"treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector." ----- what is this supposed to mean.

Some people have read this last part to mean --- if you have tried all the things outlined in Matthew 18:15-17---

-----tried to talk with them

--- and when this failed try to talk to them again with some friends along ---

----- and when this failed --- tried again only this time with members of the church along

---- and when this failed --- simply concluded ----- well they are just bad people ---- the lowest of the low --- like pagan tax collectors and therefore should be treated like the low life's that they truly are ----- and so I'm justified in having nothing to do with them anymore.

Too many Christians have come to this mistaken conclusion and fallen short on grace and mercy and love and forgiveness.

For absolute certain ---- "treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." ----- doesn't mean ----- treat them like the lowest of the low ---- ex-communicate them --- be done with them --- have nothing to do with them -- ----- move on.

Jesus so often showed the greatest amount of grace and mercy and love and forgiveness to the pagans and the tax collectors --- to the outsiders ---- and the ones considered the lowest of the low in society.

It is precisely when we have tried everything.

When we've tried everything ----- and gone through every possible option and angle that our faith and our community and our Christianity has urged and called us to do ----- Matthew 18:15-17 and then some ----- that we must demonstrate the greatest and most profound grace and mercy and love and forgiveness.

The same grace --- and mercy --- and love --- and forgiveness ----- that is Jesus Christ.

That same grace --- mercy ---- love and forgiveness of Christ --- that can only truly come alive in the context of community ---- Christian community.

Part of what ----- “For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them.” --- reminds us is that no one is ever chosen by God alone -- ----- and no one is chosen by God to go it alone.

God reveals Himself in Jesus Christ who was a community maker and builder as we are all evidence to today ----- gathered together in His name.

The Holy Spirit --- the Spirit of God breathed out into the world by Christ --- ----- most clearly reveals itself ----- in the context of community.

To experience God --- to be known by God ---- is also to ultimately understand oneself in the context of Christian community --- locally but also eternally within that great cloud of witnesses.

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And not only this ---- but this community that He has brought us together and forged us into isn't fragile or weak but instead is strong and vigorous.

And it is strong and vigorous precisely because it is rooted in divine love ---- grace --- and influence.

And we ought to remember and celebrate this.

We are here in the name of Jesus Christ ---- we are part of a larger family --- we are children of God --- and nothing the world throws at us --- no sin done against us --- no conflict ---- or challenge --- or strife --- or anything else in the whole of creation can ever change this.

And so today as we celebrate Christian community.

This Christian community specifically --- St. Andrew's in Whitby.

As we rally together kicking off the re-opening of our Sunday school ----- celebrating many of us coming together again after a summer of holidays --- cottaging --- vacationing ---- as well as Sabbath.

May we remember and celebrate and give thanks for His presence among and within us.

Today is a day all about celebrating and giving thanks for Christian community --- this --- our Christian community.

“For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them.”

He is here --- in our midst --- in our lives --- in our joys --- in our challenges ----- in everything ---- and He loves us ---- and He loves to see us come together ----- where He stands among us ---- most powerfully and most profoundly.

Amen.