

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

September 10, 2023 (Proper 18, Year A)  
Matthew 18:15-20

Today we are praying for all the victims of the recent fires, hurricanes and earthquakes. I want to start today by showing you a piece from the evening news a few years back about Hurricane Harvey.

*(Show video "Texas high school football team making the comeback of the year")*

Are you wondering why I would show you a story about football today? Because, it's not really ABOUT football, is it? It's about community. Those kids NEEDED community. They were STARVING for it.

And so are we. Especially now, with so much bad news of death and destruction, we CRAVE community.

They said they aren't just a team; they're a family. Jesus used that SAME kind of language in our Gospel today. Where our translation says, "If another member of the church sins against you," it LITERALLY says, "If a BROTHER OR SISTER sins against you." Jesus OFTEN used family language to talk about members of the church. That's why we USE those terms in church: you're my brother, you're my sister. That's how CLOSE we are MEANT to BE in the church – like a family.

And LIKE a family, we HAVE our disagreements. But we don't let those DESTROY the family. Because we LOVE each other, we don't just walk away; we find a way to work it out.

Jesus was a realist. He knew it would HAPPEN. He KNEW his church WOULDN'T be perfect. Like I said last week, the church is made up of PEOPLE, and people are SINNERS, and that means occasionally we WILL sin against each OTHER. Those "two or three gathered" may include people who don't get ALONG with each other. It may even include people who CAN'T STAND each other.

That's why Jesus gave us this procedure for dealing with conflict. Jesus says that we need to hold each other accountable. It's not okay to do things that hurt others, and Christians aren't just DOORMATS for people to WALK all over. He had just talked about stumbling blocks and tearing out the eye that causes you to sin.

But this is hard. It means confronting a person, and most of would do just about ANYTHING to AVOID CONFLICT. We don't LIKE conflict. Which is why we DO all the CRAZY things we do INSTEAD of TALKING TO the person.

But there's something we need to remember – Jesus never MEANT this as a way to get RID of people; it's intended as a way to restore the member, to MEND the relationship.

It's like a doctor telling a long-time patient that the tests for cancer came back positive. It honestly PAINS the doctor to tell a FRIEND the bad news. So what if the doctor does as WE so often do? What if they doctor just DOESN'T say anything? Or says everything is FINE? Then the patient can NEVER get better.

In the same way, it causes US pain to confront a friend with their sin, so we often DON'T. And the RELATIONSHIP DIES. It's like Jesus said last week: "Those who seek to SAVE their own life will LOSE it." Only when the painful diagnosis is MADE can the healing begin.

The church is a family just like YOURS. How does it feel to LOSE a member of YOUR family? What if someone is shunned or disowned? What if someone leaves and never talks to the family again? Losing a member of the family in ANY way is painful for the WHOLE family. What would you do to get that one BACK? To bring them home?

In the last 2 days we had to very difficult funerals here at First Lutheran. One was a beloved long-time member. The other was a young man, only 40 years old, who left behind 2 young

daughters. He was the second and only remaining son his parents buried. The lost both of their children. Can you imagine?

What do you think these families would do to get their loved ones back? To have even ONE more day with them? They would do anything!

For Jesus, that what's at stake here. We should be willing to do anything to bring our church family member back. In comparison, what a SMALL thing it is to just SAY something that makes you UNCOMFORTABLE.

For Jesus, LOSING even ONE sister or brother in the faith is UNACCEPTABLE. Even ONE LOST is UNACCEPTABLE. It's no accident that the verses right before this in Matthew are about the shepherd leaving the 99 and searching for the ONE lost sheep. Both passages are about bringing the LOST one back home.

So you see, this doesn't come from a smug, "I'm better than you," attitude, because we are ALL SINNERS; it comes from a SINCERE CONCERN for the PERSON. We are to be so CONCERNED about the break in the relationship, that we're willing to do WHATEVER we can to RESTORE it, whatever it TAKES.

Jesus is very clear about how Christians are SUPPOSED to handle conflict, EVEN and ESPECIALLY, in our PERSONAL lives. We will NOT walk away – from the congregation, the group, or the PERSON, because our FEELINGS are hurt. We will NOT hold a grudge. We will NOT engage in scorekeeping and paybacks. We will NOT YELL at someone in front of other people. We will not embarrass, humiliate, or try to destroy another person, EVEN if they have hurt US.

We WILL try to RESTORE the relationship, by talking to them in private. If that doesn't work, we will talk to them again with a couple witnesses. Even if they NEVER listen, even to the church, and we have to "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector," that is NOT the LAST word; LOVE is. LOVE is ALWAYS the LAST word. The HOPE is that the person will see the error of their ways, and come BACK to the fold.

And by the way, how did JESUS treat Gentiles and tax collectors? This is the Gospel of Matthew. What was Matthew? A tax collector. Jesus ate dinner with Gentiles and tax collectors, reached out to them, ministered to them, and called them to come and be disciples.

EVERYTHING in the church, and in the life of an INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN, EVEN how we handle CONFLICT, is about BUILDING UP THE BODY OF CHRIST, building people UP, NEVER about TEARING SOMEONE DOWN. Jesus died and rose again to reconcile us to God, and we are CHILDREN of God, so RECONCILIATION IS THE FAMILY BUSINESS. LOVE is what we DO. When we gather in Jesus name, he is with us.

It's our MISSION as the church, and as CHRISTIANS, to BRING his presence to those in need. Our disagreements should NEVER get in the way of that mission. They should be handled with the SAME LOVE AND MERCY we hope to RECEIVE.

Which brings us back to where we began. Did this subject seem out of PLACE today, when we STARTED by talking about hurricanes and earthquake victims? Did talking about ARGUMENTS in the church seem petty and inappropriate, when we SHOULD be talking about mission?

It ALWAYS does, my friends. It ALWAYS DOES. Amen.