

Sermon – Bethlehem Lutheran, Kalispell MT  
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7 September 2014  
Pentecost 13  
Matthew 18.15-20

Grace and peace . . .

*I was reading your church's constitution the other day.*

*Okay, I admit it:*

*I have strange reading tastes!*

*I was reading Bethlehem's constitution,*

*and I saw that you have a provision in the constitution for church discipline,  
that is, for what to do as a body  
when someone renounces their Christian faith  
or commits some grossly damaging act.*

*Your constitution says that,*

*before a person can be dismissed from the congregation,  
there's a process of confrontation,  
guided by Matthew 18.15-17.*

*Lots of churches have that in their constitutions,*

*and it's good to have a set of guidelines like that,  
straight from our Master's mouth!*

*This is Peter – Simon Peter, one of Jesus' followers.*

*You've heard of me?*

*I was there, as you might guess:*

*I was there when Jesus first spoke those words,*

*and that is how his words came across to me at first:*

*Okay, here are the rules for kicking somebody out of the group.*

*Good to know!*

*And then, right afterwards, Jesus tells us,*

**Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,  
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.<sup>1</sup>**

*And I thought,*

*Wait a minute, Jesus!*

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18.18

That's what you told me just a little while ago.<sup>2</sup>

Me! Just me!

You gave me the keys to the kingdom,  
and told me that I get to lock and unlock things in God's kingdom.  
Now you're sharing it with the rest of the disciples?  
What gives?

*Okay, maybe I'd better back up a little.*

*Here's how the conversation started:*

*We were on our way south,  
on our way to Jerusalem.*

*We didn't really understand it,  
but now we knew that we were on our way to the cross!*

*Jesus was hinting more and more –  
okay, he was pretty blatant about it,  
but we were too dense, or too afraid, to listen –*

*Jesus was hinting more and more that he was going to give his life,  
but we were on a totally different page:*

*We were having a little "discussion," we disciples –  
it happened from time to time!*

*We gathered around Jesus and asked him,  
**"Who is the greatest in God's kingdom?"**<sup>3</sup>*

*Hey, it was an honest question.*

*We were just curious – you know:*

*Of all the great prophets and other leaders, who is the greatest?*

*We didn't mean ourselves!*

*Well, okay, maybe we were thinking about ourselves.*

*Well Jesus, he just gets this look in his eye.*

*He got that look a lot,  
whenever we were totally off track.*

*He gets this look in his eye,  
as if to say, "You bozos,  
you don't have a clue, do you?  
Have you been listening to a word I've said?"*

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<sup>2</sup> Matt 16.19.

<sup>3</sup> 18.1

*That's what his look said.*

*He didn't actually say anything at first.*

*He just calls over to him this kid –*

*It was Joanna's 7-year-old boy –*

*He calls the kid over, hugs him,*

*and sets him right smack in the middle of us, and says,*

**I tell you the solemn truth:**

**Unless you turn around and become like children,**

**there's no way you will ever enter the kingdom.<sup>4</sup>**

**Whoever puts himself low, like this child,**

**is the greatest in the kingdom.<sup>5</sup>**

**And in fact, to welcome someone like this child**

**is to welcome me.<sup>6</sup>**

*You can guess, we all felt pretty much like chumps right then.*

*It's like Jesus was asking us,*

*What game are you guys playing, anyway?*

*Get on my page!*

*We'd have felt pretty awful*

*if it weren't for the twinkle in Jesus' eye.*

*I think he understood!*

*But he didn't stop there.*

*Jesus goes on and on about the ones he calls "the little ones who believe in me."*

*Not only the children.*

**Certainly the children, but not only the children:**

*The "little ones" – the powerless ones, the vulnerable ones,*

*the ones that don't amount to much in any human organization.*

*You know who they are.*

*Think about your own congregation:*

*I bet you can name the "little ones" in your midst.*

**No, don't look around at each other!**

*"The little ones who believe in me" –*

*They're' the ones who need a little extra care.*

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<sup>4</sup> V. 3

<sup>5</sup> V. 4

<sup>6</sup> V. 5

*They'll never be congregational president or chair a committee.  
They don't have any clout or influence.  
They're not the deciders.*

*They're the canaries in the mine shaft.*

*But look at what Jesus was doing:*

*He puts the child right front-and-center,  
and tells us that the little ones are the center,  
the heart, of our community!*

*"Who's the greatest? Who's the most important?  
The child is, the vulnerable one is, the little one is!"  
We really were on the wrong page!*

*So Jesus goes on to show us*

*how important the little ones are to God, to Jesus:*

**If you trip up one of these little one, he says,  
if you cause one of them to stumble in their faith,  
and make it hard to trust me,  
it would be better for you to be tossed in the depth of the sea  
with a huge stone tied around your neck.<sup>7</sup>**

*Jesus, I thought, that's harsh!*

*But as Jesus continues, I realize that he's simply showing us*

*how important, how precious to him, are the most vulnerable among us.*

**Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; he says,  
for, I tell you,**

**in heaven their angels have direct access to God:  
they continually gaze upon the face of my Father.<sup>8</sup>**

**They're the sheep that the shepherd would leave all the others for  
to go and search for them!<sup>9</sup>**

*So this is the point, now, where Jesus gives his instructions  
for what you've come to call "Church Discipline."*

*I have to admit:*

*I thought Jesus was moving on to a different topic.*

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<sup>7</sup> V. 6

<sup>8</sup> V. 10

<sup>9</sup> Vv. 12-14.

*(And I was glad:  
The other topic was getting a little too warm!)*

*He starts out:*

**If your brother or sister sins . . .**<sup>10</sup>

*Now there's a topic I can get into!*

*I'm thinking immediately about the stunt*

*that James and John tried to pull the other day<sup>11</sup>*

*when they tried to get the jump on the rest of us*

*and claim the top positions in Jesus' cabinet.*

*Or I think of the snide remark that Andrew made to me yesterday.*

*Or some of the antics of the other disciples:*

*You get Matthew, a tax-collector, a collaborator with Rome,*

*and Simon the Zealot, who used to be a guerrilla fighter against Rome,*

*you get those two in the same band, day after day after day,*

*and you wouldn't believe the sparks that fly between those two*

*whenever Jesus is out of earshot!*

**If your brother or sister sins?**

*What do you mean, if?*

*They're doing it all the time!*

*Oh, Jesus, put me in charge of this one!*

*All of that is running through my head in a split second,*

*but Jesus' words call me back:*

**If your brother or sister sins,**

**go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.**

**Then if the person listens to you,**

**you have regained your sister or brother.**<sup>12</sup>

*Oh. That takes all the fun out of it!*

*You mean I don't get to be the sin-police?*

*I have to go alone?*

*No spreading it to a half-dozen others first?*

*Not even to work up my courage*

*and convince everyone that I'm right?*

*Just the two of us, face to face?*

<sup>10</sup> V. 15: Some manuscripts add the words "against you," while others don't:

<sup>11</sup> I'm playing loose with the order: It actually comes later, in Matt 20.20ff.

<sup>12</sup> V. 15

*But Jesus, that's scary.  
I mean, I know I'm right, but he thinks he's right, too!  
James son of Alphaeus and I had that falling out two years ago,  
and neither one of us can stomach the sight of the other!  
Even now, we clash over all sorts of little things,  
and I know that we're still fighting  
over what he said and did back then!*

*What do you mean,  
**If he listens to you,**  
**you have regained your brother. ?**  
Is that what this is all about –  
regaining each other as brothers and sisters?*

*Jesus continues:*

**If the person does not listen to you,  
take one or two others along with you . . . .<sup>13</sup>**

*Oh, I like this part!  
Now I can bring in reinforcements,  
and make sure the idiot sees that we all know he was wrong!  
This is getting good!*

*But then I hear the rest of Jesus' sentence:  
**so that every word may be confirmed  
by the evidence of two or three witnesses.<sup>14</sup>***

*And I recognize it:*

*It comes from the Torah, from God's law.  
It's mean to protect people,  
so that, in a court of law,  
no one can be convicted of serious crime  
on the basis of just one enemy's word.*

*Jesus, I see what you're doing:  
The one or two that I bring along with me:  
They could turn things back on me:  
They could listen to the two of us,  
and show me that I'm the one in the wrong.  
Is that it?*

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<sup>13</sup> V. 16a

<sup>14</sup> V. 16b

*Jesus, you're sneaky!*

*Jesus goes on with the next step:*

**If the person refuses to listen to them,  
then bring the matter before the gathering of believers.  
And if the person refuses to listen to the whole assembly,  
then let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.<sup>15</sup>**

*That's what I'm talking about!*

*Now we're getting some teeth in this thing!*

*Heads will roll!*

*Kick the bums out: Treat them like Gentiles and tax-collectors!*

*And then I see Jesus looking at me.*

*I see that look in his eye again.*

*Oh – I'm on the wrong page again, aren't I?*

*It's as though he can read my mind, again!*

*And I hear his voice:*

Peter, yes, it is important to deal with the destructive power of sin  
in my community:

When things are left to fester and rot,  
they spread and undercut the work of my kingdom.

Out of love for the fellowship,  
out of love for those who are being hurt – my little ones –  
and out of love for the offender,  
things need to be addressed.

Sometimes that will even mean the removal of a person  
from the community,

**for the sake of the little ones!**

But Peter, remember what we're all about here!

*And I start to think.*

*And I remember:*

*How Jesus treats Gentiles.*

*How Jesus treats tax-collectors.*

*How Jesus treats outsiders.*

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<sup>15</sup> V. 17

*And all of sudden I realize  
that the expelled offender has now become **the little one**,  
and the whole gospel-process starts over again!*

*This isn't just about law and order, is it, Lord?*

*This isn't about becoming the sin-police, is it?*

*It's all about community, isn't it?*

*It's all about the little ones.*

*And that's when Jesus tosses in three sentences – rather baffling ones –  
three words about community,  
about the body of Christ,  
about Jesus' constant presence in the midst of his community:*

*First, he takes the promise he gave me earlier,  
and gives it to the whole community:*

**Whatever doors you-all open on earth, God opens them,  
and whatever doors you-all close on earth, God closes them.<sup>16</sup>**

*Jesus himself is at work in our building of community.*

*Second,*

**If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask,  
my Father will do it.<sup>17</sup>**

*As we build community together,*

*two or three or more of us working in tune with Jesus at the center,*

*God vouches for our efforts*

*and promises to be at work among us.*

*And third,*

**Where two or three are gathered in my name,  
I am there among them.<sup>18</sup>**

*This is not about sniffing out each other's sins.*

*This is not about being the sin-police.*

*This is about Jesus' community,*

*the vanguard of the new world that Jesus is creating.*

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<sup>16</sup> V. 18

<sup>17</sup> V. 19.

<sup>18</sup> V. 20

*This is about the little ones, the vulnerable and powerless,  
the wounded and broken,  
who are always the center of Jesus' family.*

*This is hard work!*

*Jesus wasn't done with us at this point.*

*The conversation would continue.*

*You'll hear it next week,*

*when I ask my glib question,*

So, Jesus, how often to I need to forgive my skunk of a brother?

As many as 7 times a day?

*You can guess what Jesus would do with that one!*

*For now, I'm left wondering,*

Jesus, how can I live this way, this way you're teaching us?

Do you know how hard it is to go to my brother?

Yes, I know, *he says.*

It really involves something of a dying on your part.

That's why I began all of this by placing that child in your midst, . . .

That's why I began all of this by placing that child in your midst,  
and telling you,

**Unless you turn around and become like children,  
there's no way you will ever enter the kingdom.**

**Whoever puts himself low, like this child,  
is the greatest in the kingdom.**

And that's why I'm going to the cross,

to carry this impossibility on myself,

and set you free,

and give you a new self –

all of you little ones held in my care.

Amen