Matthew 18:15-20

15 “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

16 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. 17 If the member 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.

18 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. 19 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. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”
The Mission of Reconciliation

The first mission trip I ever went on was to Ecuador in August of 2001. I had no idea what to expect. I had never been to South America. I had never been on a mission trip. In fact, I had only been a member of this particular church, a Korean-American church in New York City, for about four months. So, to help prepare for the trip, I rented the movie *The Mission* [SLIDE]. That sounds ridiculous now, thinking that a movie titled *The Mission* could prepare me for a short-term mission trip, but I wanted some idea of what to expect, and perhaps watching the movie would provide some added motivation as well.

*The Mission* is a 1986 film about Spanish Jesuit priests who establish a mission among a native tribe in 18th-century Paraguay. It was a bit of a stretch, but there were some parallels between *The Mission* and my mission trip. Okay, so I was not going with a team of Spanish Jesuits but Korean-American Presbyterians, but all Christians are “catholic” in the sense that the church of Jesus Christ is universal. True, we were not going to Paraguay but to Ecuador, but the two countries are not *that* far apart; at least they’re both in South America [SLIDE].

*The Mission* stars English actor Jeremy Irons as Father Gabriel, the leader of the mission, and Robert De Niro as Captain Mendoza, a mercenary soldier and slave trader. At the outset of the movie, while Father Gabriel tries to build a relationship with the local native tribe, the Guaraní, in order to introduce them to Christianity, Mendoza kidnaps them and sells them as slaves to local plantations run by Spanish and Portuguese colonizers.

A turning point in the film comes when Mendoza learns that his fiancée is having an affair with his younger brother [SLIDE]. In a fit of rage Mendoza kills his brother in a duel. Although he is acquitted of the killing, Mendoza is overcome by guilt and remorse. He meets Father Gabriel, who encourages him to undertake a form of
penance appropriate to his sins, not only the sin of murdering his brother, but also the sin of enslaving the natives. Mendoza agrees, and then accompanies Father Gabriel and the other Jesuits as they return to their mission in the jungle [SLIDE], but he does so dragging behind him all his instruments of war—swords, knives, and armor—wrapped up in a giant net that is tied to his chest by a thick rope. He is literally burdened by his sins. This is his penance.

The scene I’m about to show features the Jesuits climbing the Iguazu Falls to meet up with the Guaraní who live above the Falls. Mendoza follows behind them dragging his armor and weaponry. If he can make it to the top, this will be his first encounter with the Guaraní since he stopped trying to capture them and sell them into slavery [VIDEO].

That is one of my favorite scenes of any movie. If you can get a hold of it, the whole movie is well worth your time, as is the soundtrack. I showed that scene because, to my thinking, it is one of the best examples there is of forgiveness and reconciliation. That is what today’s passage from Matthew is concerned with—forgiveness and reconciliation. I would go so far as to say radical forgiveness and reconciliation because that is what Jesus teaches. It’s so radical that the disciples have a hard time wrapping their minds around it. We might have just as hard a time.

With chapter 18, we’ve jumped a couple of chapters ahead from last week’s reading in Matthew 16. By contrast with last week’s reading, this passage is pretty short. To give ourselves a little bit of context, let’s look briefly at what comes before and after this passage [SLIDE].

Immediately before and after this passage Jesus tells the disciples a parable. In verses 10 to 14, he tells a parable about a lost sheep. A shepherd with one hundred sheep will rejoice more over finding the one who has gone lost than he will for the ninety-nine that never went astray. Jesus ends the parable saying, “So it is not the will of
your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost” (Mt. 18:14). It’s a parable about radical reconciliation, showing the lengths that the shepherd will go to in order to retrieve his one lost sheep.

Immediately after today’s passage, in verses 23-35, Jesus tells a parable about an unforgiving servant. The servant owes his master a fortune in debt, more than he can ever repay. Before he is thrown into prison along with his family, the servant begs his master to forgive the debt, which the master graciously does. One of his fellow servants owes the first servant a miniscule amount, but still more than he can pay. The second servant begs the first to forgive his debt, just as his own debt was forgiven. Yet the first servant shows him no mercy and has him thrown into prison. When the master hears of it, he is outraged and has the first servant thrown into prison until he can pay his debt. The parable teaches that forgiveness is essential for followers of Jesus.

So, our passage today is bookended by two parables, one about forgiveness and the other about reconciliation. Those two themes come together here in verses 15 to 20. In this passage Jesus doesn’t tell a parable. He is much more direct. What he does is lay out a set of guidelines for addressing conflict within the church.

Conflict in the church? Who ever heard of such a thing? We in the church follow the example of Jesus and love one another. There’s no conflict in the church!

We might want to pretend otherwise, but of course there is conflict in the church. Christians fight, even sometimes physically. In fact, at my old church I once broke up a fight between members of the praise team. The praise team!

Christians disagree... over lots of things [SLIDE]. For Exhibit A I submit the Wikipedia page of “Presbyterianism in Korea.” I took a screenshot of the page, which lists just some of the Presbyterian denominations in Korea. I have a pretty big
monitor, but even my monitor couldn’t fit all the denominations in one image. There are 100 different Presbyterian denominations on this page (exactly 100—I counted), and I don’t think it even includes every Presbyterian denomination in Korea. The even funnier thing is, almost all of them have the same English name—Presbyterian Church in Korea, as if they are the only one.

But this passage isn’t about mere disagreements. Of course people will see things differently. This passage is about one Christian sinning against another. Christians hurt one another. It’s a sad truth that although the church is meant to be a place where people come to be healed and restored from the wounds that the world inflicts, sometimes those wounds are inflicted within or even by the church.

That truth is acknowledged in the first verse [SLIDE]: “If another member of the church sins against you...” (Mt. 18:15). A few weeks back I mentioned the word “anachronism” in relation to the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. An anachronism is something that belongs to a different time period than the one in which it appears. “Canaanite” was Old Testament language that Matthew used in a setting in which it didn’t belong. The same thing is happening here with the word “church.”

In Jesus’ day there was no church. Jesus was Jewish. For Jews of Jesus’ day the “church” was the local synagogue. What’s more, the original Greek doesn’t even use the word “church,” it says adelphos, which means “brother” but could refer to men and women. That’s why many other translations say, “If a brother or sister sins against you....” I like that better. The image of the church as a family of brothers and sisters rather than a collection of individual members is more in line with the spirit of the gospel.

The church is not like some secular organization of people who gather together because of a common interest, like watching films or bicycling. Yes, we are all individuals, but we are mutually dependent. Each member is incomplete without
the other. Here Paul’s image of the church as a body is helpful. An eye, an ear, an arm, and a kidney are each distinct parts of the body, but all are essential for the proper functioning of the body. Without any one member the body is incomplete.

So, in the church we rejoice together, and we suffer together. The rejoicing of one is the rejoicing of all, and the suffering of one is the suffering of all. It’s like the Korean concept of jeong. Jeong is notoriously difficult to translate into English. English has no precise equivalent, probably due to the fact that Westerners, Americans in particular, think much more in terms of individual identity than communal identity. My Korean dictionary defines jeong as “feeling,” “sentiment,” “human nature,” “affection,” “heart,” and “love.” Jeong is a shared communal identity and emotional bond among people.

The Christian community, the church, has something like jeong. That’s why, contrary to Western notions of individuality, sin is a communal problem. When one member of the church sins against another, it is a problem for the whole church.

Addressing that sin doesn’t require the entire church to become involved, however. Jesus suggests something much more practical and subtle [SLIDE]: “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one” (Mt. 18:15).

This is such good advice and yet it’s so hard for people to do. Many of us are not comfortable going up to someone and saying, “You know, what you just said to me, or about me, or what you did to me back there really hurt. Maybe it wasn’t your intention to hurt me, but you still did.”

We live most of our day trying to avoid conflict (it’s not easy!), so we don’t like the idea of rushing headlong right into it. But confronting someone doesn’t mean having a confrontation. You can speak the truth in love. Instead of pointing an accusatory
finger and demanding an apology, you can speak truthfully of how what they said or did wounded you.

When I was still in the corporate world, everyone in my company had to attend a seminar on how to handle conflict in the workplace. I expected it to be a complete waste of time, but I actually did get something out of it. I remember the leader telling us, when confronting someone, always to speak of specific, objective truths rather than subjective feelings. So rather than saying, “I think you’re an inconsiderate jerk,” which is purely subjective, you should be specific and say, for example, “When you asked for everyone’s input except mine I felt worthless, like my opinion isn’t valued.”

That is so much better than doing what many of us are prone to do, which is nothing. We say nothing. But we still want to show that we’re upset, so we do something passive-aggressive. People who are passive-aggressive fear confrontation, so they channel their aggressive feelings into passive behaviors. Things like not talking to the person who offended us. Ignoring them. Moving our seat. Keeping our distance [SLIDE]. That will show them that we’re upset!

Passive-aggressive behavior only allows the wound to fester and become infected. What Jesus teaches is healthier not only for the community but for the individual who is wounded.

Okay, but what if we go to the person directly and they don’t listen [SLIDE]? “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” (Mt. 18:16). The idea here is not to bring a couple of our closest friends and outnumber the other person, three- or four-against-one. The idea is, again, to speak the truth in love, directly and discreetly. Not to make a scene. Not to win an argument. But ultimately to reconcile with the offender.
What if that doesn’t work? What if the person still won’t listen even to witnesses [SLIDE]? “If the member 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” (Mt. 18:17).

Notice the pattern. Jesus tells the one who is sinned against to go directly to the offender, to meet one to one. If that doesn’t work, go back and bring two or three witnesses. If that doesn’t work, bring the matter to the church. Every effort is made to reconcile with and restore the offender. It’s not about establishing the rights of the offended: “You owe me an apology!” It’s not about punishing the offender. “Let justice be done upon him!” No, what concerns Jesus is bringing back his lost sheep, as in the parable.

If none of that works, and only as a last resort if the offender refuses to listen, then Jesus says to “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Yes! Finally! Now they will get what they deserve! Kick them out, I say! Away with you, Gentile! Away with you, tax collector! We don’t need your kind here.

How we like to rush to this point! How we welcome the opportunity to treat our offender as an other, as an outsider. We can’t wait to wash our hands of them and be done with them. Let them be to us as a Gentile or a tax collector!

There’s just one problem. Gentiles and tax collectors were the very people whose company Jesus sought [SLIDE]. Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus praised the faith of a Roman centurion. His faith was unlike any seen in Israel. Two weeks ago we heard Jesus marvel at the faith of a Canaanite woman who was doggedly determined to receive his blessing.

Jesus’ welcoming of outsiders didn’t win him any friends among the Jewish religious establishment. In fact, the religious leaders were scandalized by the
company that Jesus kept:

10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mt. 9:10-11).

To treat someone as a Gentile or tax collector is not to write them off, not to give up on them, but to continue reaching out in love with the hope and expectation of reconciling. This is the way of Jesus Christ, for no matter how stubbornly we persist in sin, no matter how often we choose to go our own way, Jesus has bound himself to us. He will not let us go. He will not write us off. He will not give up on us.

And so he asks the same of his followers [SLIDE]. He asks that we bind ourselves to one another. He asks us to loose his forgiveness and reconciliation into the world.

That may seem a tall order, something beyond our human limitations. Jesus’ love may be infinite, but ours is not. We hold grudges. We don’t want to pray for those who persecute us. This is all too much to ask!

If Jesus asked that we do this on our own, I would agree wholeheartedly. But that is not what he does. Far from leaving us to ourselves, he promises to be with us [SLIDE]: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt. 18:20).

I’m going to end by returning to the beginning. I began the sermon by showing a clip from The Mission. The clip showed the kind of radical reconciliation that is possible with Jesus Christ. Those Spanish missionaries were sent by God to the natives in order to proclaim a gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation. And I believe as well that God sent the natives to the missionaries in order to show to them the
impossible height and depth and width and breadth of reconciliation that is possible only with and through Jesus Christ. The missionaries learned just how radical God’s reconciliation is when they saw the natives forgive and reconcile with the man who had once sold them into slavery [SLIDE].

God sent each of them on a mission. A mission always involves being sent. In fact, the word “mission” itself comes from the Latin mittere, meaning “send.”

And so we too are sent on a mission. Jesus sends us into our homes, our schools, our workplaces, and yes, even our churches, with the hope, with the expectation, with the mission of reconciliation.