

**September 6, 2020    23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time    Year A**

**“What if?”**

What if another member of the church sins against you...would you just talk about them behind their back?

What if another member of the church sins against you...would you just call a bunch of people in the church to complain about them? You may even want to start a letter-writing campaign against them.

What if another member of the church sins against you...would you just send them a nasty email? Copy the clergy. And, while you're at it, CC the Session.

What if another member of the church sins against you...would you don't say anything? Would you just avoid them? Un-friend them on Facebook? And, if you can't avoid them on Sundays, then just leave the church?

...No. No...No.

In the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus talks directly to his followers to tell us what our fellowship is to be like. This doesn't sound like Jesus; it sounds more like the regulations of a church committee. If a brother or sister in the faith hurts you, angers you, saddens you, or does you wrong in any way...you go and talk to them about it directly, one on one.

It is not possible that Jesus said this in its present form. Jesus could not have told his disciples to take things to the Church, for it did not exist. What is more, it speaks of tax collectors and Gentiles as outsiders. Yet Jesus was accused of being the friend of tax-gathers and sinners; and he never spoke of them as holes outsiders, but always with sympathy and love, and even with praise.

Not only does this manner of working out difficulties lead to forgiveness, it also does so in a graceful way. The offended party isn't dragging the offender through the mud. If it gets worked out here, no one else needs to know.

However, when that doesn't work, you bring another person or two with you. This "messes" things up a bit, but still provides for grace amidst discretion.

And then, if things can't be worked out there, you bring it to the whole church.

Forgiveness is available without fear of embarrassment in the fellowship. It can be done quietly. Lovingly. Gracefully. Professor Barclay says: "Verse 17 seems to give the Church the power to retain and forgive sins. There are many reasons to make us think that this, as it stands, cannot be a correct report of the words of Jesus but an adaptation made by the Church in later days, when the Church discipline was rather a thing of rules and regulations than of love and forgiveness.

I've seen churches be totally undone by backbiting and whisper campaigns. It can be devastating-and not just to attendance and finances-but it's devastating to the Christian witness of that Church, and the Universal Church.

For when that happens, the church ceases to be a place of forgiveness, grace, and mercy. One might say that it ceases to be a church in any discernible fashion.

Forgiveness is meant to be at the core of who we are, and to be honest with you, if we can't do it between ourselves in the church, how can we ever be agents of reconciliation in the world?

I had two relationships within the church that went hay wired.

I'm not going to tell you about them, but with one talking it out with the person sometime after the cooling off period, we settled, and I was able to forgive her and she did with me. But now the second one, that was a whole different story. She really went off the deep end. All the "what if's" at the beginning that I said well that was her. She wouldn't listen, actually got a little aggressive with me, when I tried to talk with her. She went to the Pastor to talk to me, and then spread rumors about me to the congregation. She was pretty new to Westminster, so they didn't quite know her. It was embarrassing for me to go to church. I felt that everyone was treating me differently, so I quit going to fellowship and anything that she was involved in. It took me a couple of months to get myself to start attending the way I use to, but I did. I decided that God knew what I was up against and that I couldn't let her or anyone else keep me away any longer. I have apologized to her, I have forgiven her part in all that mess, I can even be in the same room with her now.

But here, right here, Jesus gives a clear blueprint for how our communities might be holy places where holy relationships might flourish. And it's something that we need to practice until it is so ingrained in our DNA, we can't imagine living another way. Because, for Jesus, there isn't another way.

In Verses 18-19 Jesus talks about that if two agree upon any matter for which they are praying, they will receive it from God. But we know that there are times that our prayers are not answered. When we pray for the physical or the spiritual welfare of a loved one and that prayer has not been answered. Time after time, people have prayed for the land or for the conversion of unbelievers and the coming of the kingdom, and even today that prayer is probably far from being fully answered. As a people, we agree to pray, and we pray desperately, and we do not receive

that for which we pray. But when we come to see what this saying means, there is a precious depth in it.

In Professor Barclay's book 'The Gospel of Matthew' he writes that there are two meanings; first and foremost, it means that prayer must never be selfish, and that selfish prayer cannot find an answer. What is a selfish prayer? Glad you asked. We are not meant to pray for only for our own needs, thinking of nothing and no one but ourselves. We are meant to pray as members of a fellowship, in agreement, remembering that life and the world are arranged not for us as individuals but for the fellowship as a whole. It would often happen that if our prayers were answered, the prayers of someone else would be disappointed. Often, our prayers for our success would necessarily involve someone else's failure. Effective prayer must be the prayer of agreement, from which the element of selfish concentration on our own needs and desires has been quite cleansed away.

Second, when prayer is unselfish, it is always answered. But here, as everywhere, we must remember the basic law of prayer – that law is that in prayer we receive not the answer we desire, but the answer which God in his wisdom and his love knows to be best. Because we are human beings, with human hearts and fears and hopes and desires, most of our prayers are prayers for escape. We pray to be saved from some trial, some sorrow, some disappointment, some hurting, and difficult situation. And always God's answer is the offer not of escape, but of victory. God does not give us escape from a human situation; he enables us to accept what we cannot understand; he enables us to endure what without him would be unendurable; he enables us to face what without him would be beyond all facing. When we pray unselfishly, God sends his answer – but the answer...is always his answer and not necessarily ours.

Then, finally in Verse 20 Jesus goes on to say that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there in the midst of them...

How many are here today? Can you feel in our midst? Jesus is here with us few as he is in larger congregations. He is just as much present at our Bible Study which will start up next week. We will be continuing with the "Sermon on the Mount: A Call to Discipleship". He is there wherever faithful hearts meet, for he gives all of himself to each individual person.

There are those who never give of their best except on the so-called great occasion; but, for Jesus Christ, every occasion where even two or three are gathered in his name is a great occasion.

Amen.