

19^h Sunday After Pentecost, 2008 (Proper 18A)

Gospel: Matthew 18:1-20

Old Testament: Ezekiel 33:7-9

Epistle: Romans 13:1-10

Title: Life Together: Problems and Solutions

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One last time, just to review. It begins with the Lord and what He does for us. He finds and purchased us, satisfies us, and comforts us. Then the Lord gets us involved. We respond by with prayer, confessing our faith, and finally, taking up our cross and following Him. That's what the Lord's been teaching us the past six weeks. This is what our life together looks like. The Lord brings us together in this place and gives us His gifts, and we respond in faith. And everything's great.

But this week, things are different. This week there's a host of problems, and they're problems within the community of faith, the church. In today's gospel we see all sorts of things that could possibly go wrong in the church. Even though the Lord has brought us together and done amazing things for us, so often we manage to mess things up, and cause division within the church. The church has problems, and today's gospel teaches us how they are best dealt with.

The first problem arises when there are arguments over who is the greatest. Comparing yourself to others is never a helpful thing to do, particularly within the body of Christ. You are tempted think of yourself as better than others. I'm the greatest because I'm here faithfully every week. I'm the greatest because I put more in the plate. I'm the greatest because I volunteer more of my time. Now don't get me wrong. You should be here every week, you should give generously of both your money and your time, but that's not what makes you great in the kingdom of God. What makes you great- being like a little child. Jesus said, "Whoever humbles himself and becomes like a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

A child is dependent and needy. A child must be cared for by someone else. A child has no great accomplishments to boast of. Our Lord has shown us the way when He Himself became a child. Jesus could have come directly from heaven as an adult. He could have skipped the diapers and the crib and the pacifier, but He chose to come in humility. Jesus was the one who had every right to consider Himself to be the greatest. If anyone had a right to this title, it was Him. Yet Jesus humbled Himself- from birth to death, showing us what it really means to be great.

To be great means to be like Jesus. Do you want to be like Jesus? Then come here to the Lord's Supper. Here Jesus will join you to Himself. Jesus will give you His very body and His blood, the same body that was born as a child in Bethlehem will be born in you today in the Lord's Supper. Now Jesus lives in you and lives through you. And so, when the problem is pride, the answer is Jesus, and you receive Jesus here in the Lord's Supper.

But what if the problem is not with you? What if there is someone else in the community, in the church who is straying, who is wandering lost? The answer again, is Jesus. Jesus is the good shepherd who goes looking for His lost sheep. He left it all behind. He came here to earth, searching after His lost sheep, giving His very life for the sheep. And once again, Jesus uses you to do His work. "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault." This is how the Lord searches out His lost sheep.

Notice who is responsible for seeking out the lost. It's you. If someone has sinned against you, you are to go and find them. Now this is not something that you do for your own benefit. You don't point out someone's fault to make yourself feel good, and certainly not to make the other person feel bad. The goal is bringing the lost back into the community, back into the sheepfold of the church.

It's not easy to do, particularly if the person is a close friend or family member. It's much easier just to let things go, to avoid confrontation, and hope that eventually they resolve themselves. But that will not solve the problem. Unresolved sin is poisonous in the community. Unconfessed sin is deadly and will tear us apart.

Once more, Jesus gives the answer to our problem. He calls each of us to do everything we can bring back those who have strayed. If one is not enough, then bring along two or three. If that doesn't work, get the whole church involved.

Again, the goal is not to kick people out of the church, but to bring them back in, to restore peace and harmony and unity within the body of Christ. If someone has left, then we bring Jesus to them in order to bring us all back together.

This is why we confess our sins before we receive the Lord's Supper. We have all sinned against the people in this room- in thought, word and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. But we look to the Lord to bring us all back together, to heal our divisions. He does this in the Lord's Supper, as He gathers us all together to share in one meal. He puts His body and His blood into each of us, and that draws us all together as the body of Christ

Finally, there are sometimes when people who are lost and refuse to be found. Sadly, some people would rather keep their pride, than humble themselves, becoming like a little child and confessing their sins. When people persist in sinfulness and refuse to repent, then all that is left is for them to be cut off. This is a great sadness, but it is necessary for the good of the entire body of Christ.

Aron Ralston was an experienced mountain climber. He had conquered 49 of Colorado's 14,000 ft + summits. So an April afternoon exploring the canyons of Utah should have been no big deal. He parked his jeep in a shady spot and set out on his mountain bike. He rode for 15 miles and then started on foot. Aron came to a narrow canyon that wound its way across the desert. He began climbed down to canyon floor. At one point the canyon narrowed to only three feet wide. As Aron reached out his right hand to steady himself, the one of the large boulders above shifted, pinning his hand underneath it. Aron was trapped. He tried everything he could

think of to free himself, but the rock weighed nearly 1000 pounds. So Aron waited for help to come. Three days later Aron ran out of water. He was beginning to get desperate. If he stayed any longer, he would die. On the fifth day, Aron decided to take action. He took a rope and tied a tourniquet around his arm, pulling it as tight as he could to cut off the blood flow. Then Aron took out his pocket knife and began to cut through his own arm. Then Aron walked another 5 miles until he found a pair of fellow hikers who helped get him to safety.

It's not a happy story, but Aron did what he had to do to survive. Our Lord's words to us today are not pleasant, but we need to hear them. "If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire." Sin must be removed from the body of Christ. If it remains, we will all be destined for hell. And so those who are unrepentant, who will not listen to Jesus' voice, must be cut off from the body of Christ. This is what Jesus speaks of when He says, "If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

When I look at my life, and all the sin I commit each and every day, I realize that I deserve to be cut off. Surely I would be better off without a sinner like me. But thanks be to God, we are not cut off. Jesus Christ was cut off in our place. He was taken outside the city. He was stripped naked and nailed to a cross. There He experienced the torments of Hell, cut off completely in your place, for you. His death makes the body whole. His death means that you don't have to be cut off. You don't have to worry about the torments of Hell, because Jesus has suffered in your place. The answer, again, is Jesus.

Yes there will be problems in the church. Sometimes there will be power struggles. Sometimes sin will drive a wedge between us. Sometimes the lost will be found, sometimes they will refuse and the difficult decision will be made to cut them off. The answer to all the problems is Jesus. Jesus who became a child. Jesus who seeks out the lost. Jesus who was cut off.

Through all of this, Jesus continues to say to us, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Despite all the problems in the church, Jesus remains with us. We have been gathered today in Jesus' Name. He is with us in word and sacrament. It is Jesus, with us, that gets us through all the problems.