

Proper 22C (Pentecost 20), 2010

Text:: Luke 17:1-10

Title: Scandals in the Church

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Nothing is more devastating to the church than when we sin against one another. When we offend one another, when we hurt one another it can destroy a congregation.

Think about the times that someone in the church has sinned against you, when they have hurt or offended you - maybe with harsh or angry word, maybe with gossip, maybe by failing to carry through with a commitment, maybe by insisting on their own way instead of listening, maybe by belittling you or dismissing you.

Think about how much that hurt, that a fellow Christian would treat you in such a way.

Those sins that we commit against one another can literally tear our church apart. Jesus says that this is the worst thing that you can do.

Jesus uses the word “scandalize” in our gospel text, which is poorly translated as “temptation to sin.” The issue is not temptation, but giving offense and causing other people to stumble. When someone is sinned against, or offended, it can cause them to stumble and sometimes even fall away. they are often driven away from the church. Especially the little ones or the newer members, those are new to the faith.

When someone is hurt or offended, they often just leave, many times never to come back. If we don't take Jesus' words to heart, and if we fail to love our neighbors, they are not only going to stay away from us, they will reject Jesus Christ Himself. They think, “If this is what it means to be a Christian, I don't want to be a part of it.” Many people have lost their faith, because a fellow Christian has caused them to stumble.

Now if people do stick around even after they have been hurt or offended, one of two things usually happens.

Sometimes the one who has been hurt retaliates in anger against the one who has hurt them. Voters meetings turn into shouting matches. People refuse to serve on the same boards and committees together. And they talk about the offending party behind their back. And they find ways to get back at the one who has hurt them.

Sometimes the hurt and the pain goes underground, it gets internalized. And you grow to resent the person who has hurt you, and you think of them in the worst possible light. Everything they do seems to annoy you and get under your skin. And consequently you feel self-righteous and good about yourself. You become the martyr who has been wronged, and you look down your nose at the one who has hurt you.

This is what sin does to a congregation. It causes people to leave and never come back. It causes people to fight and bicker and lash out at one another. And it boils under the surface and causes tension and bad feelings.

This is not the way that Jesus wants things for His people. Jesus condemns this in the strongest possible way. Jesus says “Woe to you,” if you live this way. Jesus only says, “Woe” to two other people- the Pharisees and Judas. It would be better for you to be fitted for cement shoes and for you to be dropped in Lake Michigan than for you to live together this way.

So what’s the answer? What’s the alternative?

First, recognize that this will happen. There will be people in this congregation who offend you and hurt you and sin against you. Jesus says that these stumbling blocks are sure to come, and that they’re inevitable.

Look around you. Go ahead. These folks will sin against you. They will hurt you. They will offend you.

Look at me. I will sin against you. I will hurt you. I will offend you. I will neglect you, belittle you and fail to care for you.

Sin happens.

So what next?

Jesus says if your brother (meaning a fellow member of the church) sins against you, rebuke them. Point out their sin to them.

Sin needs to be confronted and addressed. It’s much easier to just ignore sin, but then it is likely to fester and grow and lead to more sin.

Sometimes people may not even realize that they’ve sinned against you. They may not realize the pain and hurt that they have caused.

And so once someone has sinned against you, rebuke them. For your good. For their good. For our good as a community.

And if that person acknowledges their sin, confesses what they have done, then you are to forgive them.

Have you ever stopped to consider what an awesome gift it is to be able to forgive those who sin against you?

Imagine if you had the authority to fix speeding tickets, so that you would never have to pay another fine. How great would that be? Jesus gives you the authority to do something far greater in forgiving those who offend you and sin against you.

Forgiveness is God's. Forgiveness is something only God can do.

And yet God delegates this authority to you, so that you can forgive those who sin against you.

Confession and forgiveness is God's answer to the cycle of sin and hurt and anger and offense and revenge.

Notice that Jesus doesn't make any rigorous requirements for forgiveness. Jesus doesn't say, "Forgive him, as long as he's really, really sorry and can prove it to you."

No, we are to forgive without condition and without limit. Even if someone manages to sin against you seven times in one day. Each time someone asks for forgiveness you give it.

Otherwise you are caught up again in the vicious cycle of offense.

Now this is not an easy thing to do. The disciples rightly recognize that it requires faith, trust in God.

Your forgiveness comes from God. We forgive because God has forgiven you.

You have sinned against God and offended Him. You did the worst possible thing you could do to anyone. You killed God's one and only, His beloved Son. Your sin was what put Jesus on the cross.

And somehow, God loves you and forgives you. God does not take revenge on you. God releases you from your sin and guilt and punishment.

That's faith.

Jesus tells His disciples that even the smallest, tiniest faith can do great things. Even mustard seed sized faith can say to a mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted into the sea" and it will happen.

The mulberry tree is known for having a very deep and twisting root system. They are nearly impossible to dig up or uproot. You can cut them down, but they always seem to come back.

And yet with a little faith, you can speak to the mulberry tree and it will be uprooted.

Sin and hurt and offense is that mulberry tree. It gets down inside of you, twisting its way into your very heart and soul. Once it begins to grow, it's nearly impossible to uproot and get rid of.

But the words of forgiveness can uproot even the most deeply rooted sin. Notice what does the uprooting. It is the words. It is the same for you. Your words of forgiveness can root out sin and destroy it, casting it into the sea to be gone forever.

So there is hope for us, even when we sin against one another, when we hurt each other and when we offend each other. It doesn't lie in our ability to stop sinning, so don't go looking for that perfect congregation where everyone gets along and no one ever sins against you. It lies in the gift of forgiveness that we receive and then give on to one another.

Listen to Jesus and remember these three things:

- 1) Sin is unavoidable. It is inevitable. You will sin against your brothers and sisters in Christ and they will sin against you. That doesn't make it a good thing. That doesn't make it okay. But it will happen.
- 2) When someone sins against you, point it out to them. Don't let it fester. Don't hold on to it until you can get back at them. Show them their sin so that they have an opportunity to repent.
- 3) When they repent, forgive them, no matter what, because your heavenly Father has forgiven you.

Now we're going to do something this morning that we don't always do, and that is share the words of peace. After the prayers we will speak words of peace to one another, and thereby we will forgive one another for all the sins we have committed against one another. If there is someone here, someone in this congregation who has hurt you, seek them out and forgive them today. Don't hold onto that hurt any longer. And then, after we have been reconciled, we will come together to celebrate the Lord's Supper.