

Lectionary Series A September 7, 2014 The 13th Sunday after Pentecost
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, IN
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Scripture Basis:
Ezekiel 33:7-11
Psalm 119:33-40
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

The Secret Ingredient

I have to tell you right up front. I have some questions about this Gospel lesson. I always have. Who wants to talk about confronting someone who has done something to hurt you? Who am I to stand up here and tell everyone the proper way to do that? Let's look at this scripture together.

“If another member of the church sins against you...” Ok, let's stop right here. Who gets to decide what sin is and what is not? Am I qualified to label another person's sins? There are circumstances and my own perceptions could get in the way.

Just because someone hurts me, it doesn't necessarily mean I'm right and they are wrong. So who decides? If I decide, can I be unbiased when it comes to my hurt feelings. And if I confront that person and that person doesn't listen to me. Well, who am I going to take with me to talk to the one who hurt me?—Someone who agrees with me, probably. That's the way we are. Then if that doesn't work, and that offender who hurt me still doesn't get it, then we take it to the church. Now I

want to point out that the Greek word for “church” simply means “assembly”, which could mean a bigger group of my friends, those who think like me. So if we don't get the repenting and apologies we want, can we really “, *let such a one be to [us] as a Gentile and a tax collector?*” And what exactly does that mean, anyway?

Can we turn our backs to them and write them off? Sorry, I don't think so, especially when we look at Jesus' actual treatment of Gentiles and tax collectors in the rest of Matthew's Gospel. Uh, besides, wasn't Matthew, himself, a tax collector?

Jesus is up to his tricks again—making us think. Just look where this lesson from Jesus comes in Matthew's Gospel. Preceding this text is where Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep. And the story immediately after this passage is when Peter asks his infamous question, “*“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?”*”

Jesus is telling us pretty plainly, that being a member of the church means we have a responsibility. If our sheep gets lost we don't look for an hour and call it quits. We get out there and find that sheep. If our brother or sister sins against us seventy-seven times, that's how many times we forgive him or her.. And let's face it, we know from the Gospel of Matthew how Jesus treats the Gentiles and tax collectors. He loves them.

Have you seen the movie, “Remember the Titans?” Its about people with different ideas about who is right and who is wrong.

It is a true story about a community that is torn apart as white students and the community prepare to boycott the school when it is forced to integrate. The football coach, Coach Boone, is a wise man. The first thing he concentrates on is helping students get to know each other. He takes them off for a few days to a camp where they live, eat, sleep, and work together. Black and white boys, side by side. They are forced to listen to each other and see each other as human beings.

This isn't easy. The boys definitely resist getting to know the very ones they have been taught to hate their whole lives. But it works. They either get along out there at the camp in the middle of nowhere or they face the wrath of Coach Boone who has the power to take away comforts, like sleep and food. Yes, their perceptions of each other change. They start working together with a common goal. Their anger and fear is turned away from racism and toward success at playing football.

Within a few months, these teens become a solid work-together team -- not only playing incredible football, but also teaching classmates and parents about tolerance, caring and hope. It is story of hope, transformation and friendship. It is an illustration of what Jesus is teaching us today.

Jesus is teaching us about community in this text. What is “Community”, anyway? I think we sometimes tend to glamorize it. We imagine something out of *Cheers*, a place where we're accepted for who we are, where we're never

lonely, and where, everyone knows our name. But the difficult reality about community is that it's made up of people! And people -- can be difficult, challenging, selfish, and unreliable.

According to Matthew, this is what Jesus is talking about. Here are some of the high points I get from this text:

- *People sin.
- *Communities are made up of these sinning people.
- *When that happens and you're involved, do something about it; namely, go talk to the other person directly like a mature adult rather than behind his or her back.
- *If that doesn't work, involve some others of the community.
- *If that doesn't work, then things are serious and you're all at risk.

In a nutshell, authentic community is hard to come by. It's work. But it's worth it. Because when we find it, it's like discovering a little bit of heaven on earth As Jesus promises, when we gather in this way -- with honesty and integrity, even when it's hard -- amazing things can happen because Jesus is with us.

Jesus doesn't say, “*For where two or three [who have the same ideas and perceptions about everything,] are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*”

No, Jesus is right here in the midst of all we do together, in sorting out differences, in discovering ways to work together. Jesus is here working with us to make our community rich in God's love.

You see, that's the secret ingredient. We read about it in our Romans text. *"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments... are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."*

That brings us back to my question, "Who gets to decide what sin is and what is not?" We can't. We aren't God. We can't be impartial. We can't look at things through God's eyes, so Jesus taught us what to do. LOVE.

Jesus added the secret ingredient, LOVE. His ultimate love for us, his love that "surpasses all understanding," is what brings us here together at Grace and Peace. This selfless Love is what washes us clean at the font. It is what strengthens us and forgives us at the Table. Jesus' body and blood infiltrates us and empowers us to love each other with our imperfections and differences.

As we write our prayers today on our prayer cards, let's pray for those who have hurt us. Let's pray for wisdom and God's guidance as we listen to those who we don't understand. Bring your prayers up when we share the Lord's meal, where we are fed pure Love.

Remember, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us, *"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister,^[b] and then come and offer your gift."*

In fact that is why we share God's Peace before we come to the Lord's Table. Peace sharing isn't just a break after the sermon so we can chat with our friends. It is a time when we greet each other with God's Peace reconciling any differences before we come to share this Holy meal.

You know, it's God's sense of humor that this very text is the one we have on the day when we are voting on a very dear subject to all of us. We all love this church, this community we are a part of. We are diverse and because of the diversity we are so proud of, we don't always agree. Let's not be afraid of this. Let's embrace our difference views concerning our next steps for Grace and Peace as a gift from God.

By listening to each other and learning from each other we will discover possibilities for our ministry we could never imagine if we just agreed on everything. This is Holy Ground, folks, because Jesus is right here with us loving us into an imperfect,(remember, we are human,) and amazing community.

Amen