

“Sweet is the Sound of Forgiveness”

Matthew 18:15-22

Men's Communion Worship

25 March 2007

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Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

Matthew 18:15-22

“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. 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. 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. 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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

Prayer.

We are raised in a permission withholding world.

Not that this is bad, mind you;

but it is something to recognize

as we consider life, faith, and the world

and our place in it.

A permission withholding world is defined
by rules, laws, and authority.

It is an environment of punishment
doled out by unsympathetic authorities.

A price must be paid by transgressors.

After all, a civil society

expects every member to conform,

to adapt, to abide by essential laws,

such that we can all live according to a
common element of justice and peace.

When we gather as a community of faith,
as the Body of Christ,

we bring along with us all the good, bad, and ugly
characteristics of the human condition.

We tend to bring a permission withholding milieu
into church meetings and worship,

into finance and missions,

into nominations and outreach.

We assume that

what works on the factory floor

or in the board room

is what works in our community of faith.

This explains why we use Robert's Rules of Order,

we spend such time creating and modifying
budgets,

and are perpetually looking for new people

all-the-while expecting the leaders we already have

to act like we've always acted
to do as we've always done.

I've spent a lifetime in the scriptures,
as I know many of you have, too.
And I am quite convinced that
there is not a single occasion
when Jesus used a budget or Robert's Rules
in his life or ministry.

In a permission withholding world
something is always wrong.
Someone has broken the rules.
Truth-be-told,
each of us lead a double life;
publicly preaching a righteous life
yet, hoping and praying that no one
discovers our own personal flaws.
And you thought I didn't know!
In a discussion with a friend of mine
who happens to be a nun
she admitted to me
in the confidence of the confessional
that it is only by the grace of God
that any of us remain out of jail
and not behind bars.
"You are so right, sister;
you are so right."

A permission withholding environment
teaches us the importance of being civil
and polite.
"Keep it to yourself," my mother would council.
"Smile, nod, and just move on," I've heard others
advise.
"Let go, and let God" I recently read on a bumper
sticker.

It is a good thing Jesus didn't follow this advice
when he came to the authorities in the temple

exchanging money and selling at usury prices;
or he would have paid his temple tax and returned
home.

It is a good thing Jesus didn't follow etiquette
when he met the woman at Jacob's well;
he would have been satisfied with a drink from her
bucket
and been on his way.

It is a good thing Jesus didn't just go along to get
along
or that Upper Room Passover meal would have
been much different;
Peter would not have been named as one who
would deny him,
and Judas would not have been identified as his
betrayed.
They would have had supper
and returned home;
no foot washing,
no bread and wine,
just "go home and hope for the best."

Politeness, civility, playing nice -
wouldn't have worked with Jesus,
and it is doesn't work
with the Body of Christ in today's world, either.
Jesus stood up and spoke out
against the injustice of organized religion.
Jesus lived a gospel of repentance and forgiveness
preaching it throughout his life -
living it
and dying it
in his crucifixion on Calvary's blood stained cross.
Jesus called out demons
and cast them into a herd of pigs.
Jesus stood up to the grumbling scribes and
pharisees
by eating with outcasts, the unclean, Gentiles,
adulterers, and tax collectors.
He outraged his family and neighbors in Nazareth

such that they attempted to throw him off a cliff.
Truth-be-told, Jesus made the gospel controversial,
revolutionary, even.
He has taken the Good News and uses it
to turn conventional wisdom on its head.
Instead of condemning the world,
as all of us “Law and Order” types would like,
he saves the lost, the least, the broken, the sinner.

Forgiveness is scandalous!
It is outrageous!
Forgiveness
is Christ's gift of grace
to a world bent on punishment.
We want the guilty to rot in jail.
But Jesus wants something far different.
Forgiveness
opens the prison door
and lets the condemned go free.
Forgiveness becomes at one with salvation,
opposite sides of the same coin;
new life,
a second chance,
an empty tomb.

Forgiveness serves responsibility into our court.
Jesus makes us take responsibility
for our sins
and for others who have sinned against us.
It is not sufficient to let go, and to let God.
We are called to confront
the sin and the sinner
to seek repentance
and to grant forgiveness
freely and lavishly,
withholding not one iota of God's grace.
Seven times? No!
Seventy times seven!

This is so important to Jesus

that he spells it out for us
in recipe format:
Confront, one-to-one, face-to-face
in private.
Don't pass it off, to let another do your hard work.
Be a man, suck it up, and
get it done.
(No, I did not say, “Get – R - Done!”)
If that doesn't work,
as Jesus certainly knew human tendencies,
take another or two with you,
to serve as your witnesses.
And if that doesn't work,
take it to the church,
the Body of Christ,
that they might be the means of healing.
Then, if after three failures
there is no repair, repentance, or reparations,
then, and only then,
may you let it go and move on.
It truly is our choice:
we can be polite and be dysfunctional,
or we can be honest, and live a life of grace;
a life deeply rooted and committed to
the forgiveness of our crucified Savior.
Be warned:
politeness camouflages dishonesty,
civility conceals sin
and allows it to fester.
It becomes accommodating behavior
allowing us to become acculturated
to sin.
A commitment to forgiveness
takes work;
hard work.
It requires the heavy lifting of repentance,
the second-mile efforts of apology and restoration,
and the sacrificial faithfulness of Christ-like living.
The payoff for those who take
this road less traveled,

who embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ,
is a son, who was once lost, but is now found!
is a son, who was once dead, but is now alive!
It is a relationship restored.
It is an empty tomb.
It is ever lasting life.

Oh, sweet is the sound of forgiveness.
Like the trickle of water
from melting snow,
fresh and new
after months of crunching ice.
Sweet is the taste of forgiveness,
bread and wine,
the body and blood of Christ,
sharing a meal together once again
after a lifetime of estrangement.
Sweet is the sight
of the son returning home
to the ever present,
ever waiting,
ever ready
loving, heavenly Father.

The word of the Lord, as it has come to me.
Thanks be to God. Amen.