

March 17th, 2024

Matthew 18:15-22 “Teach Me”

For five Sundays and a few weeks before that we’ve been looking at Jesus’ ministry through the eyes of his most trusted apostle, Peter. We’ve poked fun at Peter a little because he’s someone who spoke his mind. In the story of Jesus’ transfiguration a few weeks ago, the gospel writer said that Peter made a comment because “he did not know what to say.” Last week Peter tried to tell Jesus that he wasn’t happy with his plan to go to Jerusalem where he would be killed. Jesus called him “Satan” and told him to get behind him. But as much as we want to roll our eyes at Peter’s mistakes, we’ve got to admit that we’ve all said and done some foolish things when it comes to how we work out our faith. One thing that I can say about Peter’s faith is that no matter the circumstances, he always managed to remain tethered to God.

This week’s text is another one of those passages of scripture that preachers either love to preach about, or they just want to sweep it under the rug and move on to something else. I’d love to jump right into the part where Jesus tell Peter that we ought to forgive someone “seventy-seven times,” but the passage starts out with Jesus telling his disciples about what they should do if “another member of the church” sins against them. He lays out a three-step plan. Step one is that if a person sins against you, go talk to them one-on-one and “tell him his fault.” I like the part about talking to the person one-on-one. Don’t drag anyone else into the picture. It’s between you and the other person. It’s no one else’s business. What makes me cringe a little is the phrase, “tell him his fault.” All I can think of is someone saying, “You know what your problem is?” Because most of us can come up with dozens of examples of problems that we think a person has. But Jesus doesn’t dwell on this very long. He doesn’t go into the finer details about healthy communication and how one should avoid shaming and blaming and how it’s better to use “I feel” statements than “you are” accusations. That leads to step two which is, “If he does not listen, take one or two

others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

Okay, let's pause here for a minute and let that one soak in. “A member of the church” has sinned against you. You go to the person to work it out, but that person “does not listen.” Maybe they casually brush you off. Or maybe they tell you to go somewhere and do something that's anatomically improbable. Jesus doesn't specify, but that's okay. You now have permission to bring two or three witnesses. You know who likes this? Church people! And please understand that “church people” doesn't mean “people who attend or belong to a church.” There's a difference between “people who attend or belong to a church” and “*church people*.” Subtle difference in wording but big difference when it comes to applying the term. Do you kind of understand who I'm talking about here? Remember Dana Carvey's “Church Lady” sketches on Saturday Night Live? That's who I'm talking about. See “church people” are folks who love to play church games. They relish the opportunity to gang up on someone to let them know what a sinner they are. Step two of this three-step process becomes a license to open up the throttle and go full speed ahead in pointing out someone's sin. Heck, sometimes they bypass step one completely.

Step three is where things get really interesting. Jesus says, “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.” This is where church people say, “Praise be to Jesus, so shall it be!” Not only do we get to “tell it to the church,” we get to treat this person like a Gentile or a tax collector!” This is taken to mean that they get to cast this person out of the assembly! You know what they call this kind of exile in the south? It's not “excommunication.” That's too Catholic. “Disfellowshipped?” Yeah, that sounds a little less high church than “excommunicate.” Most people in the south call it “getting church-ed.” They'll say, “Did you hear that old Jack got church-ed for plowing his field on a Sunday? The chair of the deacons visited him to tell him that it ain't right to work on the

Sabbath, but he didn't listen. So, then the chair of the elders, the board chair and the pastor paid him a visit. Jack insisted that he didn't do anything wrong. He was plowing his field because he'd been sick and had to catch up on his work so he could feed his family. Well, they didn't think that was a good excuse and because he didn't repent, he got churched."

"Oh come on pastor. You're exaggerating." No I am not. Church people love this kind of drama. They love showing how much holier they are than anyone else. They love to point out people's sin. That is until someone points out their sin and they end up getting churched! Then people take sides and everyone is all riled up. That's the game. You know who else loves this passage? Pastors who like to have something to hold over the congregation to make sure they fall in line. It's all part of the game. But here's a revelation for you that is going to blow your mind. It blew my mind the first time I heard it too. This phrase, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector?" This phrase that most people think gives them a license to church someone? Consider this: What was the biggest problem that the Pharisees, Sadducees and teachers of the law had with Jesus? What was the most frequent criticism they threw at him? "He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners." He healed Gentiles. Sometimes on the Sabbath! He told parables about how the kingdom of heaven is for Jews and Gentiles alike. See where I'm going here? "Yeah, but Jesus *had* to be operating on the understanding that Gentiles and tax collectors were *persona non-grata* to good Jewish people who followed the law, right?" Funny how we humans always want to gravitate to punishment. "Well, Jesus doesn't want people getting away with sin. Jesus wants to punish sin. He *has* to punish sin. Therefore, so do we. Showing grace is the easy way out. It takes guts and fortitude to punish people. That's the more difficult path!" Is it? Really? Because honestly, for me it is so much easier to want to punish someone who I disagree with than to show grace. Give me the authority to back that up and tell me that I'm not going to get in trouble for it, and I'll jump on that like a kid on a trampoline! What if "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" means "yes, address the

sin so it doesn't fester and cause problems, *but* ... keep inviting them to the table and love them anyway?" For me that's the more difficult path.

Anyway, I just wanted to share that thought with you. Consider it a warm-up for the lesson we're going to learn from Peter this morning because that's who we're supposed to be studying. After hearing this illustration about what to do with people who won't listen when someone points out their sin Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" What a thoughtful question Peter. Doesn't look like we're going to have much to tease him about this week. He's just asking a clarifying question. Jesus just told folks what to do if a member of the church sins against them. Peter wants to know *how often* you are required to *forgive* a church member who sins against him.

First of all, let's talk about the word that gets translated as "church." The Greek word is "ecclesia." By definition, it means an assembly of religious leaders, clerics, or priests. But consider this - the church as we know it didn't exist during Jesus' earthly ministry. So a few weeks ago when we read about Jesus telling Peter that he was the rock on which his church would be built? He was saying that Peter was going to be one of the founding leaders in the group of leaders who would carry out Jesus' ministry after his death and resurrection. It's hard for us to look at the word "church" and not think of what we here in the 21st century understand as the church. So what Jesus is saying in the first part of this passage is, "if anyone sins against a religious leaders, here's what you're do." Peter is asking, "Okay, but how often do I need to forgive a person who sins against me?" Typically, in Jewish law, that number is three, but Peter knows that Jesus is going say we need to go above and beyond what the law says, because he's all about forgiveness. So Peter comes up with a number - seven. Seven seems logical because it's a significant and holy number in the Jewish tradition and it's four more than what is traditionally required. Jesus says, "Seven times? No. More. I tell you seventy-seven times!" Now for those of you who memorized this passage in the King James like I did, it's "seventy times seven." There

are several books and a few songs about forgiveness called “Seventy Times Seven.”

And this is where church people pull out their calculators and say, “Okay, 70×7 is 490.” Then they’ll start making a ledger so they know when they can say, “Okay, I can stop now!” Jesus’ answer to Peter’s question doesn’t mean the literal number “77” nor does it mean “490.” Jesus’ answer emphasizes the abundance of forgiveness. The number isn’t important. It isn’t about the math. That’s not what this story is about. This story shows the importance of asking questions and expanding our faith. It’s about being okay with not having definitive answers and formulas. It’s about not having a rule book for our church games. Jesus is encouraging us to see the world in more nuanced ways. Jesus’ response to Peter’s question about forgiveness highlights the ambiguous math of grace. Peter learns about abundant grace. It’s about letting go of rigid limits and embracing the limitless possibilities of forgiveness where one act of faith can lead to forgiveness and transformation, Jesus’ teachings remind us of the power of forgiveness to make the community whole. Peter’s encounter with Jesus reminds us of the profound lessons embedded in forgiveness. Forgiveness is a boundless wellspring of grace. Repair is vital, both within ourselves and in our relationships with others. This story encourages us to embrace the transformative power of forgiveness and work toward reconciliation and healing. It inspires us to open ourselves to the expansive grace of God. By doing so, we can create a world where forgiveness mends what is broken, and where the beauty of repair shines through and illuminates our shared humanity.