



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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Poland, Ohio 44514
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September 7, 2014
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 18:15-20

The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

“I Am Among You”

Today's gospel reading comes from a long teaching by Jesus about matters concerning the church and what the church is supposed to look like. I have preached the past weeks on these things: the church is to love and care for one another, forgive one another, and bear one another's burdens. Now in this context, Jesus addresses the question of what to do if a member of the church “sins” against you – causing hurt to the relationship between you. This is a big question. It continues to come up over and over again between the members of the church, any church. So we have to understand that the church is not a group of disconnected individuals running an organization under a corporate model.

“Each member is of great value, and no member may be considered superior to any others, thus the church is not a voluntary association of like-minded individuals that regulates its corporate life by the will of the elite, the powerful, or the majority. It is a fellowship of believers united with one another in Jesus Christ, under His headship.”ⁱ

We need to hear that over and over again until we get it – Jesus Christ is head of the church. Not just our church but every church. And the instruction that Jesus gives on how to deal with conflict is this. First go to the person who wronged you – not to your friend to talk about that person, but directly to the person who harmed you. This is good family systems dynamics. Talk to that person in a loving manner and maybe just talking it out will bring reconciliation between you.

But if the person who has wronged you is not willing to reconcile, then there is a time to speak out. This is not about simple differences of opinion but about really being harmed by another, because when one member harms another we are all harmed. Any one of us could be the person inflicting harm because usually we do it without fully understanding what we do. Usually harm is not inflicted intentionally but unintentionally. But today we commonly deal with our hurt by getting angry or by leaving the church. This approach leaves everyone scarred – and sometimes for years. It is better for us to seek healing for our wounds together, not ganging up on the person who has been hurtful to another, but treating that person as a tax collector or a gentile. What? A tax collector or a gentile, aren't those bad words?

We often hear these words as a call to excommunicate – but wait – how did Jesus

treat tax collectors and gentiles? He extended his hand to them in genuine friendship and love. You see, nobody is ever ever “out”. We cannot breach the ties that bind. We are bound to one another no matter what the circumstances and we can never give up hope of reconciliation.

In our society today there are so many “breaks” in relationships. Divorce, for one, or disowning our children because we cannot condone their life style, or even abandoning our parents when their care becomes too much for us. But we are still bound to these people we have loved. There may be children for whom two divorced people must always care, even when they leave home and marry, and so they will always be bound to one another in some way. I am always presented with a quandary when I am asked to officiate at a wedding where either the bride or groom's parents are divorced and there are two sets of parents on that side of the family. The big question is where to seat them. And I have to ask some delicate questions like, how well do your parents still get along? Do I have to seat one set in a completely different row or are they OK with being seated together? It is encouraging when I see one of the former spouses sitting right next to the current spouse or conversing with them freely at the reception. It is a sign to this broken world that forgiveness can overcome estrangement.

We are never estranged. There is always hope of reconciliation. When members leave our church and go to another we can never give up hope that one day they will return to us just as we have seen today. And that is a joyous day when we can welcome home one who chooses to return to be with us in a loving relationship. As Paul tells us in the 1st Corinthians, “The church is a body and one part of the body cannot say to another, I have no need of you.” We all need each other.

When two or more are gathered together Christ, the head of the church, is there with us because He lives within each and every one of us. I remind you of that as I am about to leave on vacation. You don't come to church for the pastor or even to hear a moving sermon. You come to the church because this is where you meet Christ anew each and every week. You come to the church to worship and glorify Him. And you can do that without a pastor. You will have several visiting pastors who are coming here to do their best to open a door to you to meet Christ. They are to be held in honor for they may shine a light upon your understanding that will enable you to see things you never thought of before. Welcome them warmly and welcome the voices that you are so privileged to hear. Do not stay at home because I am away for you will surely miss something wonderful that Christ, the head of this church, has to say to you. He is present among you whenever you are gathered together in his name, no matter who is in the pulpit. And he is present with us now as we join our hearts together in this joyous celebration of Holy Communion. Amen.

