

Sermon

The Text: Matthew 18:15-20

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

We're all in the same boat. In one sense that's quite literally what it means to be part of the church. We share a common situation. Despite our many differences, there are some important things that we all share. For instance we share the fact that we're all going to die one day. We have that in common with all people.

We're all sinners. That's another thing that we have in common with all people. We belong to the church because God has graciously and mercifully gathered us in. That's something that we have in common with each other, and which is available to all people, although they might not know that God wants to gather them also.

We're all in the same boat, which is God's church. It's a classic image. That classic image of the church is of a ship, like Noah's ark, a life boat. That's why the main part of the church occupied by the congregation is called the nave. That name is related to words like naval and navy since the church is a ship. It's a kind of life raft. We're all in the same boat, because God has brought us into the church, and it's helpful to acknowledge that and think about that.

For example, we could reflect on what people in a lifeboat have in common. Now the point of common ground with people in a life raft is not that they're good enough in some way, but rather that they need to be rescued and protected from the waters of destruction. People in life rafts don't get to choose who they have in the boat with them. This is helpful in reminding us that the church is a rescue vessel. It's full of people that God has hauled in. It's full of people who need God's love, mercy and forgiveness.

Or, to put it another way, the church is full of sinners, with no exceptions. That's one of the important things that we all have in common in the church.

If we have that in mind we can more easily understand and take to heart what Jesus says in today's gospel lesson. We shouldn't be surprised that sinners sin. That's what they do. Sometimes the sin of someone else in the church will be hurtful or obvious to us. Jesus deals with the question of what do we do when a brother or a sister in Christ sins against us, or when we become aware of a brother or sister sinning. Jesus gives a gracious approach since we're together in this lifeboat for the long haul and no one is supposed to get lost. Jesus gives us a way of moving forward since we're stuck with each other and no one is supposed to fall out or be pushed out. Jesus gives a template for restoring relationships, for reconciling people, and his approach describes being proactive, has a strong bias towards forgiveness, and calls for patience and discretion.

In the large Catechism, Luther refers to these verses when he talks about not bearing false witness against your neighbour. Luther understands that Jesus is ruling out and opposing all gossiping and backstabbing. He says "Let this be your rule, then, that you should not be quick to spread slander and gossip about your neighbour but admonish them privately so that they may amend. Likewise, if someone should whisper to you what this or that person has done, teach them, if they saw the wrongdoing, to go and reprove the person in person, otherwise to hold their tongue." An important point of graciousness here is to maintain our brother or sister's honour while correcting them. If they listen to you, you've gained your brother or sister. Then you'll have done a great and excellent work. It's really amazing that Jesus has put this precious healing gift - his forgiveness - into our hands.

Jesus' concern for correctness according to the law is secondary to his concern for union with one another in him. That becomes obvious when we look at what he says in this text, and in the texts around it in Matthew's gospel.

Just before this teaching, on what to do about a Christian brother or sister who might sin against us, Jesus powerfully declares how precious everyone is to his heavenly Father. Just after this text Jesus teaches about forgiving without limit, since we are forgiven beyond measure. Then we have our text, which starts off with the quietest and most personal approach to restoring relationships.

The goal is restoration. First there is the discrete, personal approach. If that approach is exhausted without success, then a couple of other trusted people may be involved. Only if that attempt is exhausted without success is the congregation involved as a whole. The goal is for restoration, forgiveness, building up. There's certainly no rush to cut people off, and we know that Gentiles and tax collectors were certainly not beyond the reach of forgiving love. Even at the end of all the options for talking sense, if it gets to that, the door is not closed.

Jesus' means for us to always take the default position that we are brothers and sisters in his love, rather than enemies. Doors are to be opened rather than closed. Bridges are to be built rather than fences and barriers.

If a fellow Christian sins against us, they are an erring brother or sister, not an enemy, and forgiveness is available to them, just as we are freely and richly forgiven. Forgiveness is available to restore relationships, and to build unity and fellowship again. Jesus urges us to see a brother or a sister rather than an enemy. In fact he urges us all to see one another as we are - sinners who are dearly loved, who are precious to God, who are forgiven.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, remember that you are also sinners. We all stink of sin and death. It's only because of the

cleansing, freshening, life giving effect of Christ that we can live together at all. But not only can we live together, in Christ's name we can do more than anyone would imagine, given who we are. In our sinfulness we're no different from anyone else in the church, nor indeed from anyone outside the church. By God's boundless favour we've been lifted into this lifeboat, this fellowship that exists thanks to Christ's reconciling love.

We're all in the same boat together with our gracious Lord, Jesus Christ. We're sinners who are freely forgiven for Jesus' sake. God has given us the opportunity to know and experience the life-giving love of God in Christ Jesus. He honours us as guests at his table. We're loved without limit and freely forgiven. God gives us the opportunity to show that love and forgiveness to each other, so that others might see and know the wonderful, gracious life and love that God is eager to share.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.