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“You Signed Up for This” **Sermon on Matthew 18:15-20**

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Matthew 18:15-20

‘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.’

A friend of mine shared a story with me about when his mother was not long for this world. He was at her bedside, yet she still had the strength to give orders and direction about her own obituary. So together, they wrote, added, and edited, and finally he read it through to her great satisfaction. “That’s good,” she said, “Now get it down to the newspaper.” “Mom, I’m not going to do that just yet. You kind of have to die first.” “Oh, yeah, I forgot.”

I can’t help to think that Jesus just forgot. Walking to Jerusalem with the Disciples, he said, “If another member of the church sins against you...” “Church?” I can hear his followers saying, “When did we become a church? For us to become a church we’re going to have that first Easter, then you’ll need to do the Ascension thing, then we’ll be on our own. And then we’ll gather around a table, and we’ll be the church. It won’t have to be very many of us, two or three gathered in your name. You’ll be very much present with us. But, before we do all that, you’re going to have to die.” “Oh, yeah, I forgot.”

I don't really think Jesus forgot. My guess is that if you are the one "who was, and is and is to come," getting ahead of yourself is darn near impossible to do. Being timeless has its privileges.

We, however, are the prisoners of time. We can't live in the past. We can't live in the future. We can only live.

Jesus was heading to Jerusalem, he was quite open in delivering the news that he would suffer, die and be resurrected. He knew that he would no longer be with them, but they would have one another, and they could share in the remembrance of him. That's Church!

When you die, people will remember you. They'll tell stories about you in the club or the bar or wherever it was that you hung out. But it will also happen that someone and then another invites Jesus into the conversation and say of you, "There was something about the way you lived and moved and had your being that reminded them of Jesus." Wherever that conversation happens, that's church.

The church does not lead with politics. The church does not lead with who is right and who is wrong. The church leads with the Word of God. The Word of God is at the center of our attention. If you want to know who God is, you have to remember Jesus – how he lived, moved, and had his being. But as it is, we forget.

The moment the church forgets Jesus, it ceases to be the church. What it becomes is a spectator sport. Beth and I went to church one Sunday in Evansville, Indiana. We were very young at the time and so we were immediately of interest. "Welcome!" "Look! Young people!" The first thing a woman said to us was, "Who's side are you on?" We had walked in on an amazing fight! Yelling! Name calling! Someone even firebombed the pastor's car. Because after all, that's what Jesus did. No.

Jesus says, "If another member of the church sins against you..." What a thing to say, "...sins against you." Jesus knows that there will be a time when two or three are gathered and someone will forget, and another will forget, why they're there. They forget Jesus. "I can't believe you did that to me! This is supposed to be a church!"

And the hope is that in that moment of hurt and pain, that someone, and then another, will remember Jesus and it will become a church again. A church deals with sin.

I know we Presbyterians have a hard time with sin, after all who are we to judge? But we know that a church isn't a place where everything goes. That place is called Las Vegas. A church is a place where there is a word called "sin." It may be the only place you'll ever find that word.

No one ever says when you have shopping cart in hand, "Why did you sin against me, I thought this was Costco!" Nobody says that. "Hey buddy, stop that! That's a sin! Don't you know this is I-440?" Nobody says that. You don't bring up sin anywhere out there, only in the church. Now some people have the unusual expectation that when they join a church, they're not going to get hurt. As if the Body of Christ has no wounds to deal with. "I can't believe you did this to me; this is supposed to be a church. I didn't sign up for this!"

This is what happens when people don't read the fine print. Those people are often called Presbyterians. "I didn't sign up for this. I was drafted! My parents got me baptized." I had nothing to do with this!" Fine!

But some of you here are former Baptists, some are former Church of Christ folks. And before you put a toe into baptismal waters, you did your research. You knew. You read the fine print; you knew you weren't joining a club. You were joining "the light of the world, a city shining on a hill."

You knew the fine print that said, "If you're coming to church and you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, lay down your gift at the altar and first be reconciled with your brother and sister."

You knew that. "Love your enemies pray for those who persecute you." You knew that what you signed up for was going to have the agony of the cross. The letting go of your life for someone else. You have to accept the words, "I'm sorry," even when you're still smarting with pain. You knew you had the awful challenge of replacing that chip on your shoulder with a cross. You read the fine print, signed up for it, baptized, and that is to be celebrated.

But as Presbyterians, we were drafted. Our parents slapped a dress on us and marched us up to the baptismal font and boom in! None of us had any understanding of what we were in for. Sentenced to life in the church. We started out just as dumb as those disciples that Jesus called. Jesus said, "Follow me," and they said, "okay!" They didn't know. They just dropped their nets and followed Jesus over hill and dale, witnessing miracle after miracle and then, only then did they get the fine print about a cross and dying and all that was demanded. "Jesus, would it have killed you to have led with that? Then we could have made the decision to follow. I would have stayed in the boat with my Dad."

I suspect those Disciples never said that... because you know how it goes with someone you love. You meet for the first time, and then a second time, and after a while, you quit counting and you're just together. And then at some moment, it probably happened before you realized it happened, you realize that you cared so deeply about this person, and that you love and enjoy this person, and whatever happens in joy and sorrow, plenty and want, sickness and health, I will love you. I don't care what the fine print says, I do know that the large print says, "I love you."

And that's why when there is sin in the church, you meet it with a cross. And when I say, "sin in the church," I'm not talking about, "I saw you at Captain D's eating shellfish, and that's a sin." No. A sin is defined as how it is you go against the love of God and the love of one another. That's sin. You meet it with a cross.

You go person to person. One to another. If someone sins against you, you go to that person and you say those hard words. "You sinned against me." "What? How did I sin against you?" "It's the two of us now, and we're in church." It's hard to have this conversation. And if they don't buy it, you bring in another and another. Finally, you bring the whole church. And if that doesn't work, then you can toss them out and let them be like a tax collector and a gentile. But remember this gospel is written by Matthew, a tax collector.

He ends his gospel by saying the words of Jesus. "Go ye into all the world. That's my command." Share my teaching. Share this baptism. You never give up on anyone! Not in the church! Not with the cross! There's nothing more powerful than the cross.

There are a lot of articles being written about the days in which we are all living. In fact, I've received a few of them this week. Strange days indeed. False narratives, multiple truths, pandemics, and politics, I stand with Covenant, but Covenant is standing in the Capital building. Unprecedented heat. More water or no water, warm water, hot water. Earthquake, fire, Duke beat Clemson, and Alabama lost at home. These are signs of the end times if you ask me.

I think though there is great hope, whatever the time. Because there are these people who gather and when they gather, they remember Jesus.

And because they remember, they live extraordinary lives that testify to the light of God. And people will be drawn to the light because they're sick of the darkness. We will tell them how broken we are and the light that shines isn't from us, it is in us. "That's great!", they'll say, "I'm in! Sign me up."

And that's when we say, "You're going to have to die first. Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ were baptized into his death? Then and only then are we raised to newness in life." Then they'll join us. And if one of them comes to us in the church and says, "You sinned against me," you know what we'll have to do? We'll have to die first. Be raised in Christ Jesus.

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