

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost. The scripture text is taken from Matthew 18:15-20

In our Gospel narrative for today, Jesus sets up the formula for helping sinners in the church. But it starts, of course, with an individual believer, since the sin is private.

In our Gospel narrative from Matthew, Jesus tells us, by saying that if your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.

So we note that this is the key. This isn't a public sin, so to speak, it is a private sin. However, sin is sin, regardless.

It is, as the theologians describe: an obvious, actual sin against the word of God. Thus it says, if a believer, sees someone else in sin, they should go and talk with that person.

Go and talk to that person, to remind him or her, that he or she is going down the path of destruction, rather than on the path of salvation.

If your brother (or sister) sins against you, go and show him, his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. Now, this is the optimum result: that, this person would recognize their sin and admit they are wrong.

Then, this fallen, erring brother (or sister) is able to change and come back into God's fold. And, you have won your brother over. And what joy there is over one sinner who repents. But of course, that is not always the case. Some do not repent.

Then the Lord says there is another step. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. The Lord says you will take one or two along with you, and in that way, all things spoken, would be on record.

Then Jesus continues, well, maybe this person isn't going to listen to one or two, or even three witnesses, then there is another step, a final step.

If this person (the one who commits the sin) refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. Now the church, is the whole body of believers. In this way, the church, God's body of believers, would know that this person is still in sin. And that, the person who is sinning, still does not repent, then there will be consequences.

Jesus now speaks of the result of the actions of the one who does not repent. Jesus says tell it to the church; and if he or she, refuses to listen, even to the church, treat him or her, as you would a pagan, or a tax collector, namely those outside of the church.

This person, (who is sinning and refuses to repent) is to be looked upon as an unbeliever. Now this is not really the judgment of the church, but, it is actually, the judgment of God.

If this person wants to continue to live in sin, if this person wants to continue to deny God's grace, if this person, wants to continue down the path of destruction. Then the Lord says: so let them!

Now you and I realize that these are drastic steps. But you and I also realize that if one is going to lose his or her soul, sometimes drastic steps need to be taken.

The Lord reminds us that first of all, we would go and talk to that person, one on one, and then the witness and then the church. And if necessary, then that person would be placed outside of God's Kingdom.

Now some may look at that, as being very harsh punishment. Well, the unrepentant sinner or sinners, has brought the punishment upon themselves.

This is not done out of revenge or vengeance, or to show God's righteous punishment by itself. But this treatment is to show the love and concern of the church for a fallen brother or sister, and that you and I, as individuals have for a person's soul.

When a person's soul is lost, eternity is also lost. The Apostle Paul writes to the Church in Corinth, saying: "In the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." (I Corinthians, chapter 5, verses 4 to 5).

When one is set outside the church, maybe it is then, and only then, that he or she may realize the seriousness of their sin. It is then, and only then, that he or she, is in danger of spending eternity separated from God.

Now, when that person, repents, he or she can be saved on the Day of the Lord, because he or she realizes how serious losing one's soul really is.

As human nature would have it, you and I might feel like we don't want to do such a thing. We would rather just talk about the person, saying, "I sure hope he or she can turn it around" instead of talking to that person.

That is the easy way out, isn't it? Because, when we look at ourselves, we realize we aren't much different than any other sinner.

As we take a good hard look at our lives, we realize, that, but for the grace of God, we too could walk down that same path of destruction, right into hell itself.

But God in His grace and in His loving mercy, has kept us in His Kingdom. When we look at ourselves, we realize that we also commit every sin under the sun, day in and day out, either in thought, word, and deed. But still the Lord gives us the responsibility; yes, even the privilege to lead someone back away from the destruction of their sin.

The Apostle Paul tells us in the Book of Galatians chapter 6, verse 1: "My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness."

In our day and age, these steps aren't probably taken as often as they should. Very simply it is difficult for people to acknowledge what sin is.

It difficult for people in our society to categorize sin. The world would rather call sin a sickness or a disease, or a product of one's environment, or something that everybody else is doing.

And yet the Lord reminds us, that sin is still sin, no matter how large or small. God warns us, that people are going to fall into the temptation of their own flesh, that they are going to fall into the temptation of the world, and that they are going to fall into the temptation of Satan himself.

And yet, as we warn people against their sin, we also give them the hope, that they can change, not on their own, except by the power of God, by the grace of God.

Listen to what the writer of 1 John says: "Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil." (1 John 3, verse 8)

This kind of reminds me of what that comedian "Flip-Wilson" used to say: "The devil made me do it!" Yes, the devil can lead us into sin, but Christ Jesus has overcome the work of the devil. This is God's powerful, saving encouragement we give in the warning with sin.

We, as believers, can help restore our fallen brother or sister, by warning that person against their sin. And then, as continues, by offering to them God's free gift of forgiveness, found in the person of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let's be clear, Jesus described the fact, that yes the church might not feel that they have such great power or authority.

The church (the Body of Christ) might not feel equipped to help warn people against their sin and the consequences it will bring upon them.

And yet, Jesus says there is great power and authority that he gives to the church, because sin is so dangerous.

Jesus tells us in verse 18: "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."

What Jesus was really saying was: "Whatever you bind has already been bound in heaven. And whatever you loosed has already been loosed in heaven. Jesus is talking about sin.

If someone wants to continue in their sin, then the church will say your sins are bound to you. The gates of heaven are closed to the sinner who does not repent. But when they repent, they are given true freedom and their sins are loosed from them, and the gates of heaven are open.

This describes the keys of the Kingdom of God that the Lord gives to His church. So, yes, even though people might not look at the church as having any great authority or power, it does.

It is an eternal power and authority, with eternal consequences. Heaven or hell, in the end, the choice is up to that person who is in sin. If he or she, does not repent, their sins are bound to him or her forever.

Now let's look at verse 19. Jesus said: "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."

This is the encouragement that Jesus gives to His disciples and to His church today. The Lord Jesus was looking at His disciples, His believers.

Think about it, there just twelve of them, a handful, not very many. Some would say hardly enough to be a church. But the Lord's numbers are not man's numbers. The Lord Jesus, says that just where two or three are gathered in my name I am there with them, there is my Word, there is my Church.

Our Lord Jesus states that when there is agreement and it is according to God's will, it will be done. We can come before the Lord in prayer, and God hears and God answers. God's will is accomplished.

Our Loving Lord Jesus Christ reminds His believers to offer God's forgiveness to those who are in sin and to pray for them.

When we stop to look at what the Lord has done for us, we stand in awe, because of His grace and His mercy.

The truth of the matter is, there is not one person in here who honestly deserves forgiveness. There is not one of us in here who deserves to enjoy heaven forever.

But God, who is rich in mercy, who showers His love on us, whether we deserve it or not, God gives us eternal salvation, as a free gift, even though we cannot earn it or achieve by our works or merits.

Our Lord provides us with everything, by His unmerited grace. Listen to the words of the Prophet Isaiah who wrote: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:6)

We are all sinful, we are no better than the brother or sister who sins, because we are that brother or sister, who has sinned and who will sin again. That's the truth. We don't deserve anything from a pure, holy and righteous God, except eternal separation.

But thanks be to God, who has taken our sins, and put them upon His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, so that the forgiveness of sins is ours.

Because of the cross and the empty tomb, now we can live a life of joy and thanksgiving in this world that isn't joyful or isn't so thankful because of God's grace, given so freely, given so fully, given so abundantly, given so lavishly, and given so unashamed.

This is the forgiveness that God has given us, so that we might give to others, as he or she repents of their sins, and turns to God.

Remember, repentance, is turning away from sin, and turning to God, it is moving in a new direction.

The early disciples described it, when they went and preached the gospel to the people right after Jesus' ascension into heaven from the Mount of Olives.

Those early disciples basically said, "You know what? You are the ones that Jesus was put to death on that cross for, you are the ones guilty of his blood being shed, you are the ones who could have set him free, but instead, He died for you, so that you would be free."

So the people asked: "What should we do?" The disciples responded: "Repent of your sins and then turn to God."

It's no different today, some two thousand years later, as we await the return of Christ in our day to day living.

Through God's baptismal grace, you and I (as God's messengers of hope) we are to take the message of hope, the message of forgiveness of sins, and the message of eternal life to those living in sin, that God loves them more than they will ever know, and desires they too, repent of their sins, turn to God and live.

May God empower us to do so. Amen.

Let us pray:

Loving God, you desire that no one should be lost for all eternity. Empower us as your faithful disciples to reach out to those who are living sin and point them to you, so that they, may repent of the sins, turn to you and live. Help us to remember, that is only by your grace, not our works or our efforts, that this can be done. All these things, we humbly pray in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.