

Confront Evil
September 28th, 2014

Matthew 18:15-20
Pentecost 16 A

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God's word before us today is probably not going to hit anyone's top ten favorite sections of scripture. It's not something anyone would call critical, saving truth. It doesn't beat John 3:16 or the account of the resurrection or any other passage that reminds us we are saved by faith alone through God's gift of grace. And yet, what we have here is still one of the most important sections of instruction that Jesus ever gave us on living our earthly lives as believers in him. His instruction is clear and unmistakable and it concerns an issue that we are never free of: sin in our midst. Listen again to his words: <read text: Matthew 18:15-20>.

This is, perhaps, one of the more difficult questions we wrestle with as Christians here on earth: what do I do when I see sin? Though the instruction Jesus gives is very short, it is not always as clear-cut to apply and perhaps even more difficult to apply correctly. Nevertheless, it is God's instruction for us all, and so we need to take the time to understand it properly and be ready at all times to apply it whenever we need to.

To start with, we have to understand the groundwork. We need to know why we are doing what Jesus asks here and what it is we hope to accomplish in doing so. Doing the right steps for the wrong reasons can be just as destructive as not doing them at all or doing the wrong thing. The scenario is simple, we see the sin of a brother or sister in Christ. Whatever it is they are doing or saying or even their attitude appears at odds with the simple command of "love" that God has given us. Jesus here tells us to act. But first; why?

Maybe before the why let's deal with the "not whys" first. Because even when we are trying to do the right thing and confront the evil of sin when we see it, our own sinful human nature wants to take hold of us and give us the wrong motivation for doing so. And not only that but convince us at the same time that the reason we're doing it is good and noble when really it runs contrary to God's purpose and a proper understanding. So again. What are not the reasons we confront sin when we see it?

We absolutely do not do it for justice. This, I think, is our primary instinct that we must fight. We do not confront sin because it's WRONG and must be STOPPED just because it's BAD. We don't do it to exact payment for crimes, we don't do it to get an apology or a confession of guilt or to make the other person at least feel guilty for a while so that we feel better. Maybe we were wronged in the sin. We do not do this to try to right that scale. The Lord says that it is his to seek justice, his to avenge. That is not our responsibility. Of course I'm speaking to you as individuals. The Christian who operates within the government to enforce laws in any capacity is operating on God's behalf to maintain justice. It is the responsibility of the judge or the police officer and citizens to the extent the law requires. All citizens have a duty to uphold the law of the land. But it is not your duty to personally punish sin or to balance the scales for a sin against you.

You do not have the authority in yourself to dispense justice for sin. And could you imagine what chaos it would be if we all did? We all sin much and daily. Many we recognize the moment they happen. Others we see too late. Some we don't see at all unless someone else shows us. Only God has the authority to judge you and to judge that other person. And you both have the same problem.

Sinner. Failure. Condemned.

But also Loved. Redeemed. Forgiven. Acquitted.

Despite your daily sin. Despite the things you do over and over again. Despite that you should know better. Despite that you do know better and do anyway. God still loves. God still died to buy you back. God still forgives by the innocent blood of his son. God still declares you innocent and will not punish you. Just like that brother or sister you see sinning. To demand justice on their sin is do demand justice on your own. You can't afford that.

So if that's not it, there must *be* a reason, right? Jesus did still ask us to show our brother his fault. For what purpose? Jesus says to gain him. Maybe some of us remember the NIV saying "win him over". That carries the idea well enough in a readable English way, but the "gain" is more literal and also a more striking image of what is really happening. The brother or sister who is caught in sin but does not realize it is being hurt. Sin destroys faith. It destroys our relationship with God, a relationship we absolutely depend on for our forgiveness and eternal life. If that connection with God is severed then it is all over for you, or in this case, for your brother or sister in the faith. He or she is being lost and in getting them to acknowledge their sin you have brought them back from the edge and you have gained them back, in a very real way, as every brother or sister in Christ is of value to us.

We go to them out of love and concern for their eternity. Not to judge but to warn in love. To tell them, this is what God says is right and wrong. And to continue in what is wrong, or to not acknowledge the wrong you have done is to risk losing faith and forgiveness. For your own good, turn back; which is literally what "repent" means.

Understanding the reason we confront evil is key to doing it properly. Understanding your own need for repeated forgiveness helps you to not look down on someone caught in a different sin, one you may never be tempted by. Instead it keeps proper compassion kindled and recognizes that it's not you versus them, it's you and him and her and all of us in it together trying to make it to the happy end, all watching out for each other. It's not a competition like a race, it's more like trying to escape a burning building together. In our haste and in our hurry we may not all see the same dangers and pitfalls, we need to help each other, call them out when we see them, and encourage each other until we finally escape by God's good grace.

And so, equipped with the right understanding and the proper motivation, we are ready, in love, to speak to our brother or sister who needs to hear it. And the first step is simple. Show them their sin. There are a few addendums to that. For one, be wary of your assumptions. You may strongly suspect but not know. Much of sin takes place in the heart. You cannot read the heart, don't speak for the heart of someone else when you speak to them. Approach in humility, speak of your concern out of love, but don't accuse unless you know. However as our reading from Ezekiel today made it clear, NOT speaking is NOT an option. As we said, sin destroys faith. To be in a position to help and do nothing is just as wrong as doing the wrong thing. You must speak where you see it.

But as Jesus says here, wherever possible, do it privately. The 8th commandment not only requires us to approach with the best possible construction on everything we see, it also requires us to do everything to preserve the good name and reputation of our brother or sister. When a sin is private, the confrontation and confession should be kept private so as to keep a good name intact. At first glance you may find that sounds a little shady, but it is God's will in this matter and it makes sense. Would you be able to function in your life if everyone knew all your secret sins? (If you think you could then you may not understand your sin well enough, but that's a different matter).

As I said though, this is whenever possible. In our Epistle reading today Paul had to confront Peter publicly. Why? Because what he was doing wrong was being done publicly. Public sin must be publicly rebuked and repented of so that all who saw it understand not only that it is indeed wrong so they aren't tempted to do it themselves but also for the sake of the public reputation so they see that repentance is there and forgiveness have been given. If the shame of the sin is already public, then the rest needs to be as well.

But back to the private matter. As Jesus says, it may not work. Human stubbornness, pride and hardness of heart may take over. So bring along two or three others to confront them with the seriousness of the situation. In our case those would be the Pastor and church leaders. And if it is settled there then the matter doesn't need to go any further. But if they still will not listen then it must be brought to the congregation as a whole. And if they are warned by the whole assembly that their actions put them at odds with God and threaten their eternal salvation and they *still* will not repent, what then? Do you send them home and tell them we'll remind you of that tomorrow and maybe you'll change your mind? No! Jesus says it plainly, you treat them like someone outside the faith.

If they publicly deny the truth of God's law and will not repent of sin then they must be cut off from fellowship. We call this excommunication. Much of this is misunderstood so follow along with me closely while I lay it out. Excommunication is not a permanent stamp that says, "you're going to hell now." It is a statement that this is what will happen if they do not repent and return to the Lord. It is an act of love. What use is it to let someone who refuses to repent remain a member when they are dying inside spiritually? What message does that send to them? But if instead they are given this final warning that the path they are on leads only away from God, there is the chance they will repent and return someday. And they will always be welcomed back.

It is clear from all three of our readings today that God takes sin seriously and he expects us to as well. He does not want us to tolerate it in our midst because it only hurts us if we do. Keep this in mind when we see sin, and just as importantly keep this in mind when someone else shows us our sin. Even if they are coming with the wrong motivations, listen and ask yourself if they are right. If there is something you need to acknowledge and repent of, then thank them for helping you, don't be defensive as though you could never do something wrong. Let go of the pride that cripples our heavenly walk. Let Jesus and his forgiveness be your pride and you will never have a reason to be ashamed.

If one of us were in danger, about to hurt ourselves on a hot stove or an electrified fence or whatever else we would hope and pray that one of our friends would stop us. That is what Jesus is calling for here. Sin is dangerous, we should never take it lightly and we should never just tolerate it. Confront evil when you see it, but do it in love, do it to help and to save, recognizing all the time that you need just as much help to make it safely to your heavenly home.

Amen.