

Matthew 18:15-20    16th Sunday after Pentecost    Sept. 19, 1993

*15 "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. 16 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. 17 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. 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. 19 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. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*

I brought some scissors this morning. I need to make an adjustment to the gospel reading. I am going to cut out these words: "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."

Here are the instructions I want to insert instead: If another member of the church sins against you, become less committed to the church. Give less of your time, less of money, less of yourself. If the sin continues, stop coming to worship for a while, visit other churches. Slip away quietly and try to find a church where the same thing won't happen again.

The more serious the sin, the deeper the hurt, the more quietly the member will slip away.

I think that more Christians follow my version than Jesus' version.

I think that most of us would rather that no one follow Jesus' command on this.

It is hard enough holding a church together without having the whole church decide who is right and who is wrong - especially if the wrongdoer is the pastor, or a prominent leader.

So people drift to other churches, people drift from other churches to here. Life goes on.

Maybe Jesus did not understand how life would be in 1993. Not just one church in the community but many, all reading the same scriptures, all praising the same Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not just one cup to drink from, one loaf, but many. Visitors try to find a church to their liking, they shop for churches. By the time people choose a church, they may be mostly

thinking about what the church has to offer them. The fact that God has called them - placed them within a family of believers may not even occur to them.

St. Paul says that we are the body of Christ. My hand did not shop around for the right wrist to which it should be attached. My ears did not go from head to head looking for a place to fit. My hand belongs to me, I depend upon my hand; to be separated from my hand or for my hand to be separated from me would be a great loss.

But today in America, we no longer know where we belong to the body of Christ. People who move to the community have no choice but to shop around. As people's personal situation changes, they have no choice but to think about changing churches.

Yet Jesus would teach us that this gathering in his name is not a human club. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Why are you here? Give all your reasons for choosing this church, then forget them all. Instead say these words: "God has called me into this community of faith at this time. God has made me a part of this body of Christ where I belong, where I have always been meant to be."

This is not a human church but the body of Christ where God has placed you. These are your sisters and brothers in Jesus' family. They have names, they have feelings, they need you and you need them. When there is an infection in the body will we amputate? No, we will seek every way of healing that the body would be whole and strong.

That is the purpose of Jesus words. When there is conflict in the church, go and talk. Seek healing, reconciliation. Do not let the wound fester, for the infection will spread then and poison the whole body.

Do not slip away, do not leave. For then you wound Christ.

Do not drift along, for then you disable the body. But give your heart and your soul and your life, your time and talents and treasure, give your love and your service and your forgiveness here. God will be glorified in us as we are the body of God's Son in this world.

But first come to the table. Receive the very body that God has given for you, the blood that has been poured out for you. Receive all of the forgiveness, all of the love, all of the power of God; receive Christ himself in and with the bread and wine. As you eat and drink, remember that the Holy One of God gave his life for you, suffered for you, and was raised from the dead for you.

Then look around at the others gathered at the table. Look at the others who come to the table before you, after you. Every one of these Christ has made your sister, your brother. Jesus has loved them with the very same love he has for you.

Come to the table: receive the body of Christ - be the body of the only Son of God.