

*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."*

Good advice. If your life is like mine you encounter no lack of good advice. Get plenty of rest, eat lots of fruits and vegetables, breathe deeply – filling your lungs to the very bottom, diversify your investments, don't carry a grudge. Sometimes it seems that the folks that are giving out the good advice really think that things will change once they have given it to me – as if the big problem is ignorance. But for me, at least, knowing how to live is not nearly so difficult as actually doing what I know is good.

Take Jesus' advice for today. "If a member of the church sins against you, go and tell him his fault between when the two of you are alone. If he listens you have regained that one." Good advice - but not advice that is usually followed.

Usually it goes more like this. Johnny offends Billy and what does Billy do? He goes and tells Jane and Jane tells Suzie and Suzie goes and speaks to Johnny saying, "Do you know what Billy is saying about you?" Now Johnny has a reason to be upset with Billy and we are off and running.

Or maybe it goes like this: Johnny offends Billy and Billy pulls back from Johnny – avoids him – stops going to the events where Johnny might be. No one else is much affected unless too many people offend Billy and one of those is the last straw and Billy throws a tantrum and everyone wonders why.

Of maybe it goes like this: Johnny sins against Billy and every time Johnny proposes something Billy opposes it. Always with good reasons but reasons that come from the hurt that was suffered more than from seeking the good of the community.

I could go on but you get the idea. When we do not follow the good advice of Jesus relationships are harmed – sometimes the whole church gets caught up in the conflict and people take sides. If the conflict really gets rolling the rhetoric will bring in God and Jesus – good and evil more and more. It won't be enough to argue what I think but everyone will be arguing for what God wants. There is good reason for each and every one of us to listen to Jesus' good advice and to follow it.

“If a 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.” It is interesting that Jesus did not bring God into this discussion. He could have said, “If a member of the church sins against God, go and point out the fault” – but no, Jesus said, “If a member of the church sins against you.” We do not need to be protecting God – God will take care of God's own self. Nor does Jesus speak about the reconciliation being with God – if he listens, you have regained that one. Jesus is interested in our being reconciled with one another.

But sometimes there is no listening – only shouting and accusing and anger. Jesus teaches, “But if you are not listened to, take along one or two others with you, so that every word may be confirmed by two or three witnesses.” Who should you take? Take a friend of the one with whom you are having conflict. You will have a better chance of getting through to him or her. Then Jesus continues, “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.”

Immediately before section in Matthew Jesus told the parable of the shepherd who left the 99 sheep in the wilderness to seek the one that was lost. Immediately after our gospel for today we encounter next Sunday's reading where Peter asks how many times he should forgive his brother who sins against him and hears the answer, “Seventy – seven times.” But between those two peaks of reconciliation we have this deep chasm of one being set outside of the Christian church. “Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” I have heard sermons that point out that the mission of the early church was to Gentiles, and that Matthew was a tax collector. Yet I think Jesus was truly saying that sometimes Christian community must be broken. Sometimes what people do is so harmful to the church

that it cannot be tolerated. What sort of behavior would that be? If one member was stalking another, or sexually or physically victimizing, or stealing from others and would not change, to protect the community such a person would need to be removed. But only after taking each of the steps Jesus has outlined.

At the end of this process Jesus does bring in God – “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 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.” God promises to stand with the community of faith, the community of believers, the church.

And what of that one lost sheep? I think of Paul’s words at the beginning of our second lesson, “Owe no one anything except to love one another.” Even when community must be broken, the break is not just to protect the community but to help the one who is sinning, to bring repentance, reconciliation.

“Owe no one anything except to love one another.” Jesus speaks this word to each and every one of us.

Amen.