

*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."*

A week ago we did not know. Gustaf may be heading for the Louisiana coast. It could be might be possibly will be a very serious storm. We watched and listened and waited. And then? I listened to the reports as I walked one morning this week. The storm had not been nearly what had been feared, and in the voice of the reporters, even in the voices of some of the residents I heard disappointment. One resident even used that word – disappointed. They had hoped this would really be something – it was not.

Why do we keep up with the news when a storm draws near? I would like to think so that we can be praying fervently that the warnings will be a false alarm, that the winds will quiet, that life and property will not be damaged. But when I hear news of a storm approaching it is not so much dread but excitement that I sense - relief from the everyday humdrum - the hope that something momentous is happening - a desire to be in on the moment.

But for those at the center of the storm there is pain and loss.

Conflict in the church can be like a storm with many attracted to keeping up on the news and being in on the latest. Some may be praying for all involved, but some may be energized from reports of conflict. Some hope for reconciliation – some for bold justice.

Conflict has always been a part of the life of God's people. Jesus taught us what to do when one sins against another. Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Now the words "member of the church" are not in the Greek text on which our translations are based – the Greeks says, "If your brother sins". Here brother means another Christian, male or female. And in the Greek manuscripts half of the manuscripts have the words, "sins against you" and the other half have simply "if your brother

sins.” But either way the idea is this: If another Christian sins rather than talking about her or him – go to him or her and speak with that person. If you are aware of this person sinning, go and speak to this person.

Now, few of us do this. You go and talk to someone about what happens when he has too much to drink or how her gossiping is hurting others and you will be told that it is none of your business. Even suggest to the parent that sits near you that she should have better control of her children during worship and you are asking for a fight. So we all learn to do our talking *about* one another rather than *to* one another. I am guilty of this – many of you are as well. I tell myself that if enough of us are doing this talking about others that it must be okay. But Jesus’ word is clear: Go to the person when the two of you can be alone and speak directly about it. If that person will not listen then bring along one or two others. If the member refuses to listen to them take it to the church and the church will demand a change. If the person refuses to listen to the church Jesus tells us to put them outside of the church – treat them as one who still does not know Christ.

Now I suppose that in the case of a fellow Christian that was sexually abusing children such steps might need to be taken, or for someone who was continually stirring up trouble in the life of the congregation. But these cases would have to be very extreme. Mostly these words of Jesus do not have much to do with us except for the first part: Go and talk with the person - not about the person - to the person.

But if that is the case what about listening as one member of the church tears down another member of the church in conversation? Jesus did not say anything about that. What should be our guide? Do we listen? Do we argue? Do we tell the person talking that we are not interested in hearing about it?

If listening leads to prayer it is a good thing. But if listening leads to one person telling another and that person telling still another, a storm is strengthened - more damage is done.

Jesus tells us not to talk about one another but to one another. But we all know from experience that talking about one another is more delicious - and safer because we never have to admit we may be wrong. But Jesus sends us to our brother or sister so that there might be repentance and reconciliation.

In all of this we need to remember how our Lord responds when Satan testifies against us. Jesus stands with us - the innocent one stands with the sinners, takes the guilt that is ours and makes it his - like a parent standing with the child that has sinned – bearing all the shame and ridicule that falls on the child. “Still my child – no matter what my child,” the parent says.

It is like that for Jesus and you. Even when he should leave you because of your sin, he stands with you.

And always will. Amen.