

Sermon – Matthew 18:15-20; Ezekiel 33:7-11
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“As Gentiles and Tax Collectors”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The biggest, bitterest dispute she ever witnessed in the church was not about dogma or politics. Rather, Pastor Erica MacCreaigh writes in *The Christian Century* of the “great coffee massacre” that consumed the life of a congregation, with various factions – the coffee mafia, the carafe crashers, and the java jousters – working to undermine one another. At issue was whether to replace the sturdy old church coffee with more flavorful fair-trade coffee – coffee that was more justly sourced but also more expensive. One might imagine such folks having a reasonable conversation about this. Then again, this happened in a church, and churches are full of people and, well, people gonna people, as the kids might say. Instead, the carafe crashers simply dropped some bags of fair trade by the coffee machines. The coffee mafia respond not by using the new coffee, but by hiding the bags in the basement. Upon finding the hidden stash, the crashers took it upon themselves to put the grounds into the urns. The mafia discovered their trick and dumped out the new stuff to serve the old. Through it all, the factions did not actually engage in conversation with one another about what was happening. That week, the coffee combatants found themselves before the church council, who no doubt would have preferred to spend their time on matters of mission and ministry. But it was left to them to resolve the great coffee massacre before it ground up the congregation.

2. Jesus speaks often about the life that will be shared by the community of disciples. He does not speak often about the church as an institution. Today, he does. As we heard two weeks ago, Jesus says that Peter is the rock upon which the church will be built. Jesus proclaims that not even the gates of Hades can prevail against the church. Today, Jesus makes clear that the biggest threat to the life of the church comes not from without, but within. We don't have to fear hell or all its forces. But we do have to be concerned with coffee. More, much more, to the point, we have to be concerned about how we engage one another in matters or all sorts, from the monumental to the mundane. Where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, there will be differences of opinion and belief. That's to be expected; it's a good thing. What good would we be to one another if we all thought and felt and believed in the same ways? The danger is in how we engage or avoid these conversations. We so often get it wrong. And once we've been wounded, our inclination is to further wound. We talk not to, but about, the other person. We slander and gossip. We avoid and undermine. We in the church can act just like people outside the church, which makes it all the more painful. It's also, truth be told, not a great way to witness to the world around us.
3. Jesus sees it all coming. He is well aware of the sin we carry, which is not theoretical but is inflicted upon one another in very real ways. So, he gives us today what has been called the Rule of Christ. He knows wounding will occur. But we are called to respond differently. The steps are simple. Go first to the one who sinned against you. If the two of you can't work it out – or, I would humbly add, if you do not feel entirely safe on your own – take along one or two others and see if they can help. If that doesn't work, tell it to the church – which likely doesn't mean standing up in your pew and shouting on Sunday morning, but instead arranging time to speak with the pastors or the Elders. The point of the process is not to achieve victory; it's not to win the argument. The point is to reclaim one who has offended and to effect reconciliation within a relationship that had frayed or fractured. As God tells

Ezekiel, if others continue to sin and we do not seek to bring them back, it will be on our heads.

4. You don't need me to tell you that we live in a polarized world. The dominant model of public discourse is loud and aggressive, seeking to blame and shame. Social media, now entrenched in our lives, allows us to spout off through our fingertips instead of engaging one another face to face with gentleness and compassion. We sort ourselves further and further into tribes of affinity and agreement. The church might be the only place left where we encounter and engage people who are truly different from us, because the church is the community into which God calls all sorts of people. When we disagree, we have the opportunity to model a different kind of discourse to the world around us. Now, I don't mean that we simply turn down the volume or that we just act nice. No, what Jesus is after here is much more radical. Jesus calls us to live as one, as his one Body alive and at work in the world. We are called to the difficult work of offering and receiving forgiveness. Forgiveness, as the Archbishop Desmond Tutu remind us, "is not some sentimental namby-pamby thing; it is costly. It cost God the death of God's Son."

5. But what if the first three steps of the Rule of Christ do not work? What then? Is it three strikes and your out? It seems so on the surface. If they refuse to listen, let them be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector. Gentiles, after all, were to be avoided. And tax collectors were universally reviled. Is Jesus saying, "Away with the unrepentant?" No. The church, after Jesus' death and resurrection, will become a mission from Israel to the Gentiles. And as for tax collectors, they were some of Jesus' favorite people. He spent time in their homes, eating with them and defending his presence with them, insisting that God's grace extended even to them. He even called a tax collector to be his disciple. A guy named Matthew, the only evangelist who records today's passage. And to press the point further, Jesus' teaching today immediately

follows a parable. One about a shepherd with 100 sheep; when one goes missing, the shepherd doesn't say 99 is good enough. He searches for the lost sheep until he finds it, and then he rejoices. How do we, as sheep of the Good Shepherd, live in community with one another? We seek reconciliation relentlessly. We see the best in others. We admit our own faults when we are wrong. We delight in diversity. And in so doing, we unlock the joys of heaven, here and now.

6. Friends, you were each once a sheep far off, a sinner on the outs. And now you are not. Jesus, in his living and loving, his dying and rising, has brought you into this community. Look at the people around you. Seriously, take a moment and look at your neighbors. What Jesus did for you, Jesus did for them. Who are we to bear grudges or nurse wounds? Live in love with one another, wherever that leads you. As for this sermon, it leads us back to the beginning, with the coffee factions before the council. In the end, the council insisted upon a compromise. On Sundays, they would blend some of the old church coffee together with some of the expensive fair trade. It's a solution without a winner. The old guard still complained that too much money would be spent. The upstarts that the rainforest flavors of the good coffee would be ruined. But they all acquiesced. The coffee would be blended. And who knows, maybe they would be re-blended, too, finding not coffee grounds, but common ground at the foot of the cross, where are all called, all are welcomed, all are forgiven, found, and loved. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.