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Sermon: I Want to Speak to the Manager
Text: Matthew 18:15-20
September 10, 2023

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¹⁵“If your brother or sister sins against you,^[a] go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If that person 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

It's an old and well used joke. So apologies if you have heard once or twice or ten times before. A person is stranded on a desert island. Think of the movie Survivor with Tom Hanks. Actually, I'm a little bit off; and this is an important part of the joke. It is important to note that the strandeer is an American Christian. So an American Christian is stranded on a desert island. Anyway, while stranded, they shoot off signal flares, they write S.O.S. in the sand. They frantically wave at the vessels that come near. Finally after several years of survival and living off the land, the marooned strandeer is identified and rescued. A rescue helicopter is dispatched to the island to pick up the stranded person. And then the helicopter lifts off to bring them back to the coast guard rescue vessel and return them to their life back home. As the helicopter is picking them up and taking off once and for all from the desert island, the rescue personnel notice that there are three huts built by the stranded rescuee and the rescuer asks what the three huts were for? Well the first one was the house I built and where I stayed while on the island. What about the second one? That is the church I built and where I worshipped on the island. Okay, then what about the third one? That is the church I used to go to.

Matthew 18 is all well and good, but we are a country, actually even before we were a country, we were a land where people came, escaped, and sought refuge, many of whom were trying to get away from religious disagreements. When in doubt, pull up stakes, and start a new church. When there is intractable disagreement, divide, split, go separate ways. About twenty years ago, I heard the author Tom Wolfe speak, discussing one of

his recently published books. He took some questions from the audience and somehow he got on the topic of comparing his current life in cosmopolitan New York City to the town where he was born and raised in rural Virginia. He didn't like to drive in the big city, but one day he needed to run errands and was out and about driving on the streets of Manhattan. Not always sure of his bearings, he was driving at a leisurely pace when suddenly he noticed a very large SUV about to swallow him whole in the rearview mirror. As quickly as he could, he put on his blinker and then moved to the right and as the SUV passed, he gave a gentle wave, as if to say in a friendly way, sorry for holding you back. His wave was met by its own more aggressive in kind hand gesture as the SUV sped on ahead and into the busy-ness of the day and out of his life. Wolfe, reflecting on this incident, and its larger implications guessed that something like that would not have happened in his native hometown in Lexington, Virginia. Not because everyone loved each other or all liked each other or were even always on the same page, but because living in the small town you wouldn't want to tailgate your butcher and run him off the road because you depended upon them for your meat. You wouldn't want to tell your barber to go to hell because you were going to depend on them for the next haircut. You wouldn't want to have road rage on your next door neighbor because you might them and they might need you. But on the seemingly anonymous streets of Manhattan, Wolfe surmised, you could be free to aggressively dismiss someone out of the way, because you were probably never going to see them again, and most likely didn't depend on them for anything anyway. Human beings, relationships, and lives, at least in theory, could be expendable, disposable, and collateral.

Let me just also say, I have never been a huge fan of this passage from Matthew. Love one another. I'm all for it. Where do I sign up. Blessed are the meek, the imperfect, the less than virtuous. 100%. But mutual forbearance, direct engagement with those who have wronged us or those whom we have wronged, repairing relationships, seeking justice, and practicing forgiveness with difficult people like me, I would like to speak to the manager. Rather than deal with you, rather than work with the human life and lives right in front of us, just let me talk to the manager. By the way, 'I would like to speak to the manager,' should probably be the phrase or one of them that define our time. No longer able to navigate the world of disagreement, political commitment, road rage, or social issues, we simply ask for the manager and get an enforced and coerced solution to our problems rather than working them out through give and take, conversation, mutual respect, and a commitment to the common welfare of each other. I don't want to deal with you, we'll let the manager sort it out. David

Brooks has recently described it this way: ‘pain that is not transformed gets transmitted. People grow more callous, defensive, distrustful, and hostile. The pandemic made it worse, but antisocial behavior is still high even though the lockdowns are over. And now we are caught in a cycle, ill treatment leading to humiliation and humiliation leading to more meanness. Social life becomes barbaric, online and off.’¹

Lutheran turned Catholic Richard John Neuhaus reminds us that there is no hate ‘so hateful as the hate that is exercised in the name of Christian love,’ and the peace we make with our siblings in Christ in our prayers of confession may be a very partial peace or ‘more of a truce and a pledge to be decent to one another, in hope of one day more fully actualizing God’s promised shalom.’² At the end of our passage in Matthew, Christ’s bold, comforting, and hopeful promise to be among us where two or three are gathered is a gift of grace, but living together in harmony and love where two or three are gathered can be fragile, tentative, and clumsy in practice. Part of the reason this passage makes life difficult and gets on my nerves and is challenging as sermon fodder, is because it comes across as awfully finger wagging and bossy. Who wants to picture our Lord and Savior as a finger wagging ‘I want to speak to the manager’ type? Who wants a Jesus who comes across as smarmy and sanctimonious telling us what is good for us. Giving us a step by step process and heavy handed instructions on how to talk to each other, how to resolve our problems, how to deal with conflict when we feel wronged by another member of the Christian community.

But ironically, this passage that challenges us to live together, to bear with one another, to talk to each other through challenges and difficulties, to live as a community of vulnerable imperfect, and flawed human beings held together by grace and, not by our virtues, our good ideas, living this way is only possible and any kind of reality if it is defined by the very last verse of our passage: ‘where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’ We won’t make it due to our correct thinking on everything, we won’t make it for being on the right side of all the issues or even history itself, but by a miracle of grace that happens when we gather because Christ promises to be among us when two or three or more of us are together, forgiving what we have been, amending what we are, and summoning out what we can be by a grace beyond our own misplaced self-sufficiencies.

¹ David Brooks, ‘How America Got Mean,’ *The Atlantic* (August 14, 2023).

² Richard John Neuhaus, ‘The Search for Community,’ *Freedom for Ministry*, 123.

In his book *Seculosity*, David Zahl reminds us that the ‘gospel of Jesus Christ is not an improved ideology to adopt or to foist on others. It is not a system but a message—one rejected by both the conservatives and the liberals of his day—addressed to those who have failed to live up to their principles [us], about the God who meets people in their need, not in their virtue. What binds its adherents together is not common righteousness, but shared weakness.’³

Maybe that is what I dislike about this passage the most. It assumes I cannot succeed at being a Christian on my own or without the at least two or three of the other imperfect, flawed, hopelessly self-centered, unrealistic pursuants of self-sufficient Christianity all around me. It assumes I need help and even that I am at my best not when I am completely self-sufficient and independently successful, but when need help, when I have realized my limitations, when I come, not just to grudgingly depend on others, but when doing so enriches my life rather than diminishes it. It assumes I can’t be a Christian virtuoso and maybe that wasn’t the point anyway. The hardest part of this passage is not knowing that I need forgiveness or need to learn to practice forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation in this world and especially to those who I may have wronged, but that I am not meant to do any of this on my own or left to my own pursuits, but I have to do this with a whole community of people who think they can succeed at Christianity better by doing it on their own and by themselves. And every which way Jesus tells us that no one can love him, follow him, become a Christian on their own. Instead, ‘where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’ Only there. Even in the dysfunction; even when things seem intractable; even when it would be much easier to follow Jesus Christ were one is gathered. Not two or three.

The very things we think we should be ashamed of and airbrush out of our lives or detox out of us, things like limitations, acknowledging our weaknesses, realizing we are dependent creatures, knowing that we can’t storm out of our disagreements or challenges or problems and start over, but that Christ accompanies us in with and through them. We think these characteristics are weaknesses and traits we should jettison, and we find they are the very things Christ uses to tether us together. We think spiritual gifts are some special powers or virtues that have been honed for twenty years in a sacred tower or intentional community, but Jesus reminds us that they are much more tangible, much more common, much more at our finger tips. It’s just that we don’t think they could possibly be anything special. Depending upon others and coming to terms with our limitations. Seeing that

³ David Zahl, ‘The Seculosity of Politics,’ in *Seculosity*, 158.

vulnerability, dependence, and asking for help are more powerful forms of Christian discipleship than all the flexing of our gifts we could do on our own.

The fact that none of us can be a Christian alone is not a weakness at all, but a way to discover the richness in the lives God puts around us, a way to be unburdened from ever having to pretend that we are at the center of the universe, and a way to encounter Jesus Christ through the people he refuses to ever be without; even where two or three are gathered. Thanks be to God.