

Pentecost 12, Proper 18A, 090411

*"Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor;
therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

Good morning.

Today's gospel lesson is part of Jesus' teaching about our life together in community, how it is that we are to live and love within the Christian community, especially when things go wrong. And because we are talking about human beings living in community, we can be fairly sure that things will go wrong. This is part of what Jesus means when he says in last week's gospel, "Take up your cross." Today Jesus says, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone."

Oh, right! Is there anything harder than confronting someone who's grieved you? Especially when it's someone you know well? It's so much easier for us to take our grievance to someone else - to talk about it to anyone else who would listen. Anyone else that is, except the one we ought to. But this is what this gospel is all about. It's about how we should behave if we are indeed going to call ourselves members of God's family, members of God's community.

So, let's take a look at what's going on in this straightforward gospel passage. There are no secrets here. We don't have to look too far beyond the images Jesus uses in order to understand what he's saying.

All of chapter 18 talks about our behavior as God's people. In verse 1, the disciples ask Jesus who the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven is, and he says it's anyone who is like a little child. In fact, he says unless you become like a child, you cannot enter the kingdom. And worse, anyone who causes the downfall of a child would be better thrown into the sea and drowned. Then he told the parable of the lost sheep. The good shepherd leaves the 99 and goes to find the 1 that is lost. Today's gospel follows directly after this parable. All of this concerns what our faith life should be like. Bottom line: we should look after one another and be honest with one another.

But of course, that's not as easy as it sounds, and we know this. We often fail, even in the best of circumstances - or more accurately, in what we know should be

the best of circumstances. But this is life. Gossip happens and people are wronged in many different ways. We all make poor choices at times. We're human; life here will never be perfect.

So this gospel also talks about reconciliation. Reconciliation, because our actions have an impact not only on the one person we've wronged, but on the whole community as well. Because we are the people of God, what we do affects the whole. We show that in the way we worship together. That's why we baptize and confirm people within a community celebration. That's why we say the confession and pass the peace together. That's why we say, "We" believe in one God. That's why our hymns have a lot of "we" and "us" in them instead of "me" and "I."

So, Jesus says, go to the one who wronged you. If that doesn't work, go to the community. Now, more than one thing can happen. Going to the community means sharing perceptions. Maybe we've misunderstood what someone has done. The community could help us see our misperceptions - see things in a different light so to speak. Maybe it turns out that we've not been wronged at all.

But if the other is at fault, Jesus says, and if the community doesn't seem to be able to help, treat this person as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. His listeners would understand that image immediately. A gentile or tax collector was about as much of an outsider as you could be in that culture. They could be ignored, pushed aside.

Except these same disciples had seen how Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors.

Do you remember Matthew's account of the Canaanite woman who asks Jesus to heal her daughter, and he says it isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs? When she replies to him that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table, Jesus is forced to go beyond the cultural boundary and extend his care and healing to a gentile. Jesus also called a tax collector to be in his closest circle of disciples.

So, evidently, we can't put limits to our forgiveness either. We can't say, "OK, fine, that didn't work. I don't have to do anything more." Reconciliation means the door to forgiveness has to stay open. But there's more. When we wrong others, we must repent. We'll hear more about that in next week's gospel.

So, what do we take home today? If we want to be what God calls us to be as a community, and not just as individuals, we need to be a good example of how to live with each other with all our human faults. Having 'the right kind' of worship - community baptisms, saying 'we believe,' and passing the Peace - may be good 'outward' signs. But if we don't reconcile our differences with each other, people will see the façade. Others must see us care for each other. They should hear us speak kindly of one another and they should see us forgive and ask for forgiveness.

It's not always easy, and we won't always do it. But as we try to live as we are called to live, we have only to remember that Jesus also said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them."