

Sermon Text for February 2, 2025

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Psalm 32:1-2 and Matthew 18:15-20

“The church is supposed to do what?”

I have often spoken to you about the collaborative relationships that we have here in the Strasburg ministerium. It is one of the few places where I have served where churches understand the truth of what we are which is co-workers in the field as opposed to competitors vying for the same pool of people. The reality is that there are plenty of people in this community. We have so many new developments going up around us that if we don't take advantage of the new residents that are coming into Strasburg and the surrounding community then we are the only ones to blame for it.

The church is seen in Scripture as a single entity and not a whole bunch of individual communities and institutions that are working at different, sometimes opposing, sides to issues and strategies. Jesus knew that his disciples would disagree and that they would separate but I can't imagine when he prayed in John 17 that his followers would be one that he ever dreamed that the church would be so divided and fragmented, even worse than our country. At least in our country there is basically two sides, as far as churches there are so many sides it is hard to keep track.

We have forgotten one simple truth that I learned very early on in my ministry. Some of you have heard this before, I think this was a story that I told my first Sunday here, so it is okay to go back and start using old stories again, I've done it already. It was our first year when we were missionaries and pastors in Italy. We were responsible for 60 children between the ages of 3 and 18 in the heart of bustling Portici which was basically Naples, Italy. We were pastors in a church there as well, the only Methodist and Presbyterian leaning church in the region for miles, there were Roman Catholic, and Pentecostal, and Lutheran, 7th Day Adventists, and we didn't really play well together.

During the week of Christian Unity, which is in January by the way, I helped to organize a service where all of the Christian Churches and pastors would meet together for a service of Unity in the main Roman Catholic Cathedral in the main square. The day came and I was a bit nervous, I was fine with my Italian, but it was still a big event. I noticed as they were preparing that there the main microphone was not quite working the way that it was supposed to be working. I was scheduled to be the first one to speak and I was to welcome everyone by saying: The Lord be with you, and the response would be, and also with you. Well, the time was drawing close and I realized that we were not going to be able to fix the mike but I wanted

people to know that there was something wrong with the mike so I stepped up and said, There is something wrong with this thing, and the people responded, and also with you.

When we forget as the church that others have something to contribute, when we forget the humility that defined who Jesus was, when we forget that there is something wrong with us as well, then we lose sight of our primary purpose which is to love God and to love our neighbor. As a church we should be known for our tendency to forgive, to provide grace and hope and community. We shouldn't be defined as a place where you go to be judged, and find yourself outside looking into a network of cliques that are impossible to penetrate.

Our Scripture today Matthew gives us guidelines, that honestly we never use, in regards to how as a church we ought to deal with discipline which emphasizes that within a church we ought to be speaking directly with each other about all things and that we have to look for ways to be the flock together.

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If we are to understand this Matthew Scripture we have to know the context in which it was written. This Scripture is within the context of the lost sheep and the party that is held when that sheep is found. The driving theme surrounding this Scripture is that when a person comes back into the fold, when a person who was once part of the church, the community, and has gone away, and now comes back again, there should be celebration. The assumption is that there is happiness that can be found in being forgiven and being received back in.

We read about that in Psalm 32, where we read happy are those whose sin is forgiven and who God does not count their sin against them. It is interesting because early on much of our growth had to do with people who had been gone from the church had come back to the church, we saw that in 2011-2014 or so, then we had a wave of people come into this church who were not connected to any church at all before they came here. Our goal is to bring people into this church who are not currently involved in any church at all, not people who are looking for a change from their current situation at a church where they currently may be.

I believe in loyalty in pretty much all things. I believe in loyalty in marriage, I believe in loyalty to your sports teams, for life, I believe in loyalty to your church. But the reality of the church today is so very different from the reality of the church in Matthew's day. In Jesus' day, let's be clear, there was no church, so when Matthew was speaking about a member of the church, we know that he was talking about things happening decades later when he was writing about this Gospel.

In Matthew's day there was only one option. If you were unhappy with the church, or if the church was unhappy with you, you had to leave your faith entirely because there was no other corner church to go to. It is interesting because these Scriptures are what are used to justify shunning within the Amish community. Today if a church asks you to leave not a big problem because you can just go down the street and start the same problems you started at the other church and you could do this for your entire life, just spend a couple of years at a church for the next 20 years of your life.

But this language is so foreign to us because I have always understood that the primary purpose of the church is to express God's desire which is ultimately that sinners be saved and not condemned. That is the work that we have before us, to bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus and not to declare them condemned. Let's look at our Matthew Scripture and try to figure out what Jesus is saying in the midst of the passages of bringing the lost sheep back.

First of all, the scenario that he paints is one of an individual who has sinned against you. Look at vs. 15, if a brother or a sister, sins against you, the directive that we are given is to approach that person individually. Speak to the person with whom you have an issue directly. Do you hear that church? We are not told to gather the opinion of our other friends in the church about an individual and maybe an exchange that you had with them or their actions before we approach that individual. 99% of the time if we would approach the person with whom we may have a disagreement then we would never have to go to steps two and three.

We live in a culture where we like to avoid conflict and so in that culture we want to speak to others to make sure that we understand what just happened. But when we approach others about a problem we have with an individual then you start something that can't be stopped. I know we use the word gossip a lot, but none of us would say that we gossip, and yet most of us would ask your friends at church or our family members about a situation and call it advice, when we should be interacting with that individual directly.

The problem that we have with steps 2 and 3 is that we have an understanding of sin, and transgression that takes it away from the communal. I'll never forget that Sunday that during Lent we had a black cross up here and chalk at the base of it and I asked everyone to come forward and write their sin on the cross as a sign of repentance and contrition, I wrote my sin on there as well. After that service I got a reaction from a member of the church who said something like: how dare you, my sin is between me and God, it is not meant for public consumption.

And this tends to be our approach to sin, and our approach to our relationship with Jesus. How dare the church insert itself? We have a very individualized concept of sin, what I do with my life is my own business. But behavior is interactive. Meaning that what we do has an impact on others and on the church. Many of us view the church as an organization that provides a service as opposed to a family in which we live, share things in common, struggle with our daily lives together, pray for each other. This is a completely different mentality than seeing our relationship with Jesus as just something that is one on one as opposed to living our faith out in a community as Scripture demands and commands.

What would this church look like if we followed what Matthew says? Well, if we followed the first step then we would never see the second and third step. I am convinced of that. Jesus warns against making your loyalty to the kingdom of God, and ultimately to the church of Jesus Christ, impingent upon your own personal life journey lived in isolation. We are called to be the church, to live together, to share all things together.

The church should be know for its ability to forgive and include all people in its mix. But I'm afraid we are becoming known more and more for its backbiting and hypocrisy. That's why people who leave the church now don't go down the street, they just stay home. Luke has this Scripture and it is much more simple in his rendition of it in Luke 17:3 – If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. Luke adds, you need to forgive him over and over and over and over again.

If you want mercy from God, then be merciful to others. That is what the church ought to be known for, its ability to show mercy. Amen.