

2020 09 06 – Who Do You Say that I Am? – Part Four

Matthew 18:15-20

Before we begin today, I want to ask you a question. You've just listened to a brief passage of scripture from the Gospel of Matthew. This passage can be interpreted in many ways. It can be looked at from lots of different perspectives. I want you to tell me in a word or a phrase one theme or message that you heard as the scripture was read this morning. Also, please type in the chat so I can share your answer. Maybe it's just a word that you heard and it stuck with you. Maybe it's a theme or idea that you really don't agree with. Please know there are no wrong answers. *(wait for responses – discipline, excommunication, banishing, punishment, right relationship, connection between earth and heaven, prayers granted, Jesus presence in worship)*

Today's sermon is the last part of our four-week series: "Who Do you Say that I Am?" During this series we are exploring who Jesus was to his disciples 2000 years ago and who he is for us in the 21st century. We are looking at four different scripture passages from the gospel of Matthew to see what they tell us about Jesus' identity and what it means to be his followers in today's world. In week one, we talked about Jesus as both teacher and life-long learner. In week two we explored the title "Messiah" or "Christ." Last week, we asked ourselves what it meant to be followers of a martyr, someone who was willing to die for what they believed in. And today we are going to talk about Jesus the reconciler; we are going to talk about the importance of reconciliation.

You are probably asking yourself. How did she get that theme from this scripture passage? And that is a very good question. Some of the themes that you came up with are probably more likely options. This scripture passage does read like a section of a congregation's manual of policies and procedures. And it does sound like Jesus is recommending that members of the congregation be "loosed," or asked to leave.

But rather than look at these words alone, I took this passage and I put in the context of the entire chapter. We only read six verses, but there thirty-five verses in the 18th chapter of the gospel of Matthew. Just before this passage the author shares Jesus' parable of the lost sheep which ends with the words, "it is never the will of your Abba God in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost." Even earlier the author includes a quote from Jesus saying, "those who would cause any of these little ones to stumble would be better off thrown into the sea with millstones around their necks." In the first fourteen verses of this chapter, the theme is God's love for every single person and the importance of keeping everyone in right relationship with God.

If we look at what follows today's passage, in the very next verse Peter is asking Jesus, "When a sister or brother wrongs me, how many times must I forgive? Seven times?" "No," Jesus replies, "not seven times; I tell you seventy times seven." And then Jesus tells a parable about the importance of forgiving our neighbours and our friends. Today's passage is surrounded by messages of love, mercy, forgiveness and the importance of staying in community, of staying connected with God.

So let's look at the verses one by one in this context:

- Verse 15: “If your sister or brother should commit some wrong against you, go and point out the error, but keep it between the two of you. If she or he listens to you, you have won a loved one back.” The emphasis here is on keeping that person connected. The hope is that the listening goes both ways and that a true return to friendship is reached—“you have won the loved one back.”
- Verse 16: “if not, try again, but take one or two others with you, so that every case may stand on the word of two or three witnesses.” This is the second attempt at reconciliation. The witnesses are there to assist with the listening and the truth-telling that is always a part of forgiveness and full reconciliation.
- Verse 17: “If your sister or brother refuses to listen to them, refer the matter to the church. If she or he ignores the church, then treat that sister or brother as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.” This is the third attempt at reconciliation. In our congregation, this would mean that the Church Council or Executive are now involved in the issue. The group of listeners has increased. But there is still a hope for reconciliation, for truth, and for forgiveness. If that is not possible at this point in time then this member of the congregation is to be treated like “a Gentile or a tax collector.”

In those days Gentiles and tax collectors were seen as people to be evangelized, people who needed to repent, to change their ways in order to become followers of Jesus. They were lost sheep who needed to be found, they were among the stumblers who needed to be picked up. So these sisters or brothers were not being shunned or sent away. Probably their role in the community would have been changed and they would be given less authority, less voice, until such time as they were able to change their ways and to fully accept the forgiveness, the reconciliation that was being offered.

Verse 18: “The truth is, whatever you declare bound on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you declare loosed on earth will be loosed in heaven.” It’s interesting and, I think, helpful to note that other translations replace “loosed” and “bound” with “forbidden” and “allowed.” There are certain behaviours that cannot be tolerated on earth or in heaven. There are certain behaviours that must be forbidden within families and within communities. There are boundaries that have to be set. But these boundaries need to go hand in hand with opportunities for change and for growth, and eventually for reconciliation. For instance, violence and other forms of abuse cannot be tolerated and suggesting that the victims should just forgive and forget is not acceptable. There are times when it is useful to treat someone “like a Gentile or a tax collector.” But that does not mean they are garbage to be thrown away. Jesus teaches us that reconciliation with each other and therefore with God, is always the end goal.

Verses 19 & 20: “Again I tell you, if two of you on earth join in agreement to pray for anything whatsoever, it will be granted you by my Abba God in heaven. Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst.” In these verses Jesus is assuring us that we don’t have to do this difficult work by ourselves. Jesus promises that when we are about this work – that is, when we come together as a community to address our differences, resolve our disputes, seek to end conflict, and repair relationships – he is there. I don’t believe that we will get whatever we pray for, but I do believe that when we gather together in Jesus name and truly listen for the truth, then healing and reconciliation can happen.

<http://www.davidlose.net/2020/09/pentecost-14-a-community-rules/>

We are currently living in the midst of: a pandemic, economic upheaval, a polarized political landscape, and, of course, racial injustice and the resulting cries for reform. The need for reconciliation in our church, our community, our country and in our world has never been greater. In the United Church creed we say that God “comes in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new.” As followers of Jesus we are called to a ministry of forgiveness and love. Every time we repair our relationship with a neighbour, we also reconnect with God and we work towards God’s reign of peace, justice and reconciliation.