

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Proper 18, Year A
Matthew 18:15-20

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Today's program is sponsored by BJ McMillan in honor of the 98th birthday of her mother, Marjorie Thomas.

It is much more peaceful now.

When I saw the lectionary readings for today, my mind immediately went back to the very first time I'd ever preached on this passage. I was the assistant rector of St. Thomas's in Richmond, and I'd just been called to be the priest-in-charge of a little congregation in Heathsville that had been through a traumatic split when the rector and the majority of their congregation had accused The Episcopal Church of being very bad Christians and had left the denomination while seizing the church property. The congregation had done some important healing in the year and a half since the split, with the help of Hal White, but the wounds were deep and still painful. The future was also very uncertain. The court case was not going particularly well and nobody knew how long it would drag on. The congregation was worshipping at the Methodist Church most of the time, and once a month in the backyard of the house rented from David Chilton.

So the task ahead felt daunting, and at the same time I was very excited about this brave band of faithful Episcopalians. I was telling a friend how excited I was about it. She asked me what I was going to preach on in my first sermon at St. Stephen's. I said I hadn't looked at the lectionary yet, but I'd be glad to preach on anything but church conflict. Then I looked at what the lectionary passage was about. Church conflict.

Steeped as I was in Christian teachings about love, hope, relationship-building, and reconciliation, I wanted to find a way to make things better with the folks who had left. I put effort into attempts to do that, and there were some ways in which that improved the situation to a certain extent. Still, as one exasperated parishioner put it, "There are some things you just can't fix."

There is a lot in the gospels about reconciliation and forgiveness. Today's gospel passage comes immediately after the passage about the shepherd who has 100 sheep, and leaves the 99 to go in search of the one that went astray, and if he finds it rejoices over it more than the 99 that never went astray. And today's gospel passage comes immediately before Peter's question, "If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As

many as seven times? And Jesus says, Not seven times, but seventy times seven times. Then Jesus tells the parable of the master who forgives a huge debt run up by one of his servants, and the servant refuses to forgive a small debt from a fellow servant. These are valuable and even essential parts of Jesus' teaching.

Right in the middle of these two passages we find today's passage, which probably isn't anybody's favorite Bible verse. But it too has a lot of value. The original scripture reads, "if your brother sins against you" which is translated here as "if another member of the church sins against you". We might assume that the "Christian thing to do" is simply to endure the sin in order to keep the peace. But this scripture tells us to do the opposite, to go to the person and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. In the long run, enduring the sin just prolongs a bad situation, and gradually building up more resentment over time. Bringing it up with the person may be awkward in the short term, but getting it out in the open is often the way to resolve it for the long term. If that works, you have regained the person. Great! If not, this passage says to take one or two others with you. Sometimes there are elements of a situation that you might not see, but which are visible to someone with a different perspective, and that additional perspective may provide a solution.

Then we get to the hard part: if the person refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. That sounds kind of harsh.

There are lots of people who have written in to the advice columnist Carolyn Hax for help with relationship problems. After dealing with them for over 20 years, she says it all comes down to this. If you want your significant other to change, the first thing to do is to ask them to change. If they change, congratulations! Problem solved. If they don't change, you have two options: #1 continue the relationship with the person as-is or #2 break up. It sounds so simple, but she's got a point. And it definitely beats what these couples describe themselves as doing, which is to keep haranguing the person to change, sometimes for years, or keep agonizing over the person not changing, sometimes for years, or to keep blaming yourself for not being a good enough partner to get the person to change, sometimes for years, or the multitude of ways of being miserable and making the other person miserable, sometimes for years. You can spare yourself years of misery by choosing either to acknowledge that the person is who he is and you want to stay, or to acknowledge that the person is who he is and you want to go.

In the short term, there may be some grief that you have to let go of some romantic expectation of perfection in your life partner if you decide to stay, and there may be some grief that you have to let go of the relationship if you decide to break up. But after that stage passes, life gets a lot more peaceful.

And that is the kind of peace that this gospel passage is offering us. Yes, it's important to be loving. Yes, it's important to be forgiving. And the fact remains that no matter how loving and forgiving we are, none of us is capable of making every single relationship become wonderful. And we don't have to. This passage tells us we don't have to stay in relationships in which someone is harming us.

There will always be tax collectors around. It is as sure as death and taxes. We don't have to be close to them. We don't have to hold a grudge against them. We can simply let them go about their business as we go about our business. We can forgive them while remaining at a safe distance. We can even love them while remaining at a safe distance.

We can also go about this with a sense of humility, because while we know that there are times when someone sins against us, we also keep in mind that there are times when we sin against others. Just as the people who sin against us sometimes recognize that they're doing it and sometimes don't, when we sin against others we sometimes recognize that we're doing it and sometimes don't.

It takes wisdom and discernment to know what to do, so that we neither give up too easily nor hang on too long. What this passage reminds us is that sometimes the Christian thing to do is holding on and sometimes the Christian thing to do is letting go. And at various times, both of them can make our lives more peaceful.