

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Martin Eden

Pentecost 15
Saturday, September 9, 2023, at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, September 10, 2023, at 9:00 a.m.

“Doing That Which is Difficult”

Matthew 18:1-20

Our readings today offer numerous topics for discussion. As we are beginning our Sunday School year for our youth, I could fill three sermons with what Jesus says concerning the place of children and the need for child-like faith within the kingdom of God. Jesus says, “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

With the anniversary of September 11th this weekend, it would be easy to preach on the Epistle reading and the role of earthly authorities in the struggle for peace on earth.

However, in our Gospel reading, what I couldn't let go without comment was Jesus talking about how there is a greater and more difficult battle we are waging than anything we hear about in the news. Dealing with evil-doers and law breakers is a difficult task. But Jesus gives us instructions on how Christians are to deal with other Christians, which is often an even more difficult task.

It is a constant in life, among Christians and non-Christians alike: We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Every person sitting, or standing here today, has been guilty of offending someone else by something we said, by something we have done, or by something we have left undone. We are all very much in

need of forgiveness.

Throughout the Bible, the Lord is very clear, not only about our need for forgiveness from Him, but also our need to forgive one another. From days of old, God has taught His people how to forgive. As I said last week, God spoke to His people through the prophet Jeremiah and said: “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sin no more” [Jer. 31:34]. True forgiveness is to have a short memory.

But in addition to forgiving one another in your heart and mind, Christ also gave to us instructions on what to do when a fellow Christian has sinned against you, and it is something that is serious enough that it eats at you or changes your relationship. If it is truly no big deal, or an unintentional faux pas – you forgive, forget, and move on. But if it is something you can’t let go or is a situation where this person is remaining unrepentantly comfortable in their sin, Christ says: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.”

As unpleasant as this may be for us to do, Christ says that we need to show them their sin. Christ tells us that we are not doing our friends, neighbors, or loved ones any favor by glossing over or looking past serious sins. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, don’t give up on them. Take one or two others along, and pray that they see the great weight of their sin. If they still refuse to listen, only then do you make anything public by telling it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, then you are to treat them as “Gentiles or tax collectors.”

Unfortunately, when someone sins against us or does something that we find offensive, very often our first reaction is to immediately begin treating that person as the proverbial pagan or tax collector. That is not what Christ desires us to do.

When difficulty arises in our personal relationships because of sin that is or remains harmful to us physically, emotionally, or spiritually, the common responses are to either immediately condemn the person and treat him as the “pagan or tax collector,” or to make excuses for the person’s behavior and gloss over their sins: “It’s not that big of a deal” – even though it is a big deal.

As we said, that is not the desire of God. Neither of these common responses are the way in which Christ dealt with people in His life. Last week, we heard Jesus rebuke Peter when Peter sought to hinder Jesus being the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan.” There are times to be blunt, but Jesus’ bluntness was not done outside of the context of His love for Peter.

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus compared sin to having a foreign object in your eye. For me to be a good neighbor, or brother, I need to make sure that I can see clearly so as to remove the speck from my brother’s eye. Make sure there is not a plank in your own eye first.

If we want to be like Christ, we cannot take either of the easy paths. We cannot hypocritically cast the first stone and stand in judgment, and we cannot excuse people’s sins and allow them to remain living comfortably in their sin, and, as I said last week, thereby making the Gospel a “pillow for their carnal mind.”

We must love them enough to do what is difficult and unpleasant. We must show them their sin, show them the need to repent, and admonish them to leave their life of sin.

What Christ demands of us here in Matthew chapter 18 is not easy for us to do. When people in our lives, especially friends and loved ones, offend us or stumble into sin, we don't like to rock the boat. Our human nature says: "Just let everything go away smoothly and quietly." However, until repentance, turning from that sin, and forgiveness of that sin is a reality; and if it is a continual sinful situation, until that sin has been abandoned, it will not go away smoothly and quietly. Satan will never allow that to happen.

The typical, easy ways of dealing with people's sinful situations will only lead them to destruction. If we simply condemn them, we will chase them away from Christ and His mercy. If we excuse their behavior or gloss it over, they will remain comfortable in their sin; they will never see a need to repent; and they will remain ignorant of their needs, never experiencing the wonderful grace and forgiveness that Christ paid for with His blood on the cross.

I encourage you to love your family and friends enough to do that which is difficult. If they are erring in sin or have sinned against you in some way, admonish them firmly but gently, and always within the context of your love for them. When they repent and leave their life of sin, forgive them and remember their sin no more. That is the way God has treated you, and that is God's desire for you to treat one another. Amen.