

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We seem to have before us today in our appointed lessons, all kinds of judicial instructions for conflict resolutions. In our assessment and understanding of these lessons before us today, we have granted ourselves legitimate cause for our legalistic sense of our Christian faith and this is how our faith is then manifested in the world and the communities around us. So, with our legalistic sense of our Christian faith refined and polished, and locked and loaded, we tell ourselves that this is just what we need as we engage with that divisive-cancel-culture out there. And so in our shiny-self-righteousness, we climb up on our assumed moral high ground armed with our misunderstood biblical interpretation wheeling judgment instead of grace. But before we do this, let's take a deep breath and ask ourselves what does it mean to be Christian today?

To be Christian is to be bound together with one another in community. Today in our Gospel lesson is where our individual legalistic sense of our Christian faith flies right into the face of a true Christian community...a community that extends beyond those in here this morning and those we choose to like...and extends to those on the margins, those who are most vulnerable, and yes, those out there we might not like so much or totally dislike.

Our legalistic sense of our Christian faith, as noble as we choose to see it, can play out as a stumbling block in all aspects in any Christian community. I will ask once again as I asked last week, as Baptized Christians, we know that we have been saved by the unmerited, undeserved grace of God, given freely to us through the life and death of Jesus Christ...how then shall we live together with one another?

If you will notice I said, *WE* know that *WE* have been saved by the unmerited, undeserved grace of God, given freely to *US*. We all know what "we" means...but we leave here and live as: *I* know that *I* have been saved by the unmerited, undeserving grace of God, given freely to *me*. But when you or I pray by ourselves or as a Christian community every week, or after every meeting, or in the gatherings beyond these walls, or even in the privacy of our own rooms in our homes and in the depths of our hearts...we pray as Jesus taught us to pray with the very basic element of our faith...we pray *Our Father*, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. In the "Lord's Prayer" we pray as *OUR* Lord taught us to pray and as we are commanded to pray...we pray as a community...*Our Father*...we don't say Dear Father, or Father, we pray *Our Father*.

Our entire Gospel lesson today has to do with maintaining the integrity of the Christian community, both in terms of making sure that the most vulnerable, the least, and the lost are protected and RETRIEVED should they stray. Today Jesus in this lesson is also addressing the power of sin that seeps in and destroys the community. And by sin we are not necessarily addressing a moral or ethical value within the community, we are addressing our self-centeredness and our ambition to be guided by our own self-righteousness gained and understood through our legalistic sense of a Christian faith we claim as our own.¹

¹ Van Harn, Roger E.. *The Lectionary Commentary Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: Gospels*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. The commentary based on the appointed Gospel reading for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, year A, Gospel Lesson: Matthew 18:15-20, page 105.

In a sense, our faith becomes our hammer of justification and righteousness instead of God's grace and mercy that has been shown to us and freely given to us through Jesus Christ. So we appoint ourselves as the enforcer for God when we hear these passages before us today:

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.
(Matthew 18:15)

From Ezekiel we *hear*:

⁸ If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. ⁹ But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life. (Ezekiel 33:8-9)

From the psalm we hear:

³³ Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes...

³⁴ Give me understanding, and I shall keep your law... (Ps 119:33a & 34a)

Sadly some have taken *I shall keep your law* to mean I will enforce your law as we do likewise with the other lessons today. In other words, we take this to mean that...we are the enforcer...my sin does not matter here, oh but yours does. Sadly, I have heard and I have experienced those who've concluded that they are the righteous one...they are right and those sinners, rather, those who wronged "me" are the unrighteous. Is this what our faith is really about? Is this the mission of the church to be the hammer...the strong-arm of the law? Is this how we maintain a Christian community?

From the very words of Jesus Christ we conclude that we are authorized then to pass judgment and cancel that person out. Yes, I know there are other little things or passing phrases woven into these lessons, but I am lifting up, and probably wrongly assuming in some cases, but for the most part, lifting up what WE, the very self-righteous use to undergird our righteousness and our judgment of others.

So we hear our Gospel today to mean, "If another member of the church sins against *me*," that opens the door to *MY* law...established by *MY* understanding of these words that say what they say...and "my law" or these words do not apply to myself...of course...they merely apply to those I choose to apply them to. We see this as a Christian way to step on others in order to make ourselves appear as the righteous ones.

I say this because I have been personally judged by these words and if I am honest with myself and truly search my heart, I may find that these mentioned words have been used to build up my own righteousness. In this we assume our faith and the justification of it allows us to pass this kind of judgment not only on other people of faith, but on those who may be struggling in the faith and those whose hearts have not been opened to the Word of God. Where then is the Gospel for those who struggle with faith or those who are seeking God and or a better understanding of God. Is this really what the Gospel and proclaiming the Gospel is all about? Does this thinking and understanding build up the Christian community, or does it tear it down?

Herein lies the problem...our faith does not call us to judge, it calls us to love, even in the face of sin...their sin and my sin. Consider this for a moment, how would we ourselves stand up to our own scrutiny? Would we ourselves be able to withstand our own views in this context? Would we ourselves stand up to our own judgment? Of course we would because...in our perception of judgment of others and our justification to do so, we assume ourselves to be correct...we are the righteous...we are the winner. Reckoning is ours...right has won the victory over the wrong. We seem to place this judgment and justification into our worldly courtroom where a judge presides over a two-party dispute where one party is right and the other is in the wrong. Keeping in mind in this system one does not exist without the other. In other words we cannot have right without wrong...if one is right it is not wrong and if one is wrong...it is not right. Judgment then is based on right and wrong. But the justification of God is the condemnation of the HUMAN BEING not the right or the wrong...justification is not granted to one over the other.

In God's judicial system or courtroom, by the cross of Christ and the resurrection of Jesus Christ both parties receive justification and not one over the other. In Jesus Christ the verdict is not right or wrong it is life over death, it is a righteousness that is not won by who is right as proven by who is wrong...God's judgment is passed through the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ.

In this crucifixion and resurrection of God's righteousness, NOT OURS as seen through who is right or wrong, God's righteousness has been manifested and is given, NOT WON in a judicial judgment but God's righteousness is given to all.² Our faith is not our justification over others, nor does it void our sin and enable us to pass judgment on others, our faith is the opening through which the crucifixion and resurrection is projected into the present order.³

The present order is this world...this church...this faith community. We have gathered today, in this present order, around this WORD that for some people of faith may seem like a free pass to judge others. But this WORD that has gathered us is Jesus Christ. In this gathering around this Word we are the church, the gathering of two or three, or two or three thousand to speak and to hear the Gospel. The Gospel is NOT judgment of others and how to incorporate that judgment into our faith and upon others. The Gospel, the Good News is the grace and mercy given to us through the saving acts of God made known to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and NOT because we have judged one another as right or wrong. The church, this gathering here and across the community, occurs because this Good News occurs.⁴ This Word, this promise made to us by God in Jesus Christ is NOT judgment for us to use, it is the very food that feeds our souls...feeds and nourishes our faith...as we become food for the souls of others...strength for the faith of others. Our faith is then taken into the world NOT in judgment, but as the opening through which the grace and mercy given through the crucifixion and resurrection is projected and shared into the present order.

This gathering...this community is what being Christian is about. This community is the Good News that is sent as the embodiment of the Gospel for the world to be fed and nourished. The

² Seifrid, Mark A., *Christ, Our Righteousness, Paul's Theology of Justification*. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2000. Heading #7, Justification in Paul, the New Testament Witness and Beyond, section heading, Justification and Protestant – Roman Catholic Dialogues, pages 183-184. This "courtroom" image is from this author's discussion raised in this chapter.

³ Ibid, page 184.

⁴ Jenson, Robert W. *Story and Promise, A Brief Theology of the Gospel About Jesus*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973. Chapter Eleven, "The Community of the Promise." Page 177. The basis for this paragraph in this sermon is taken primarily from the opening of this chapter.

church is not ON A MISSION, we are the mission of making the Gospel come alive in the world...NOT with judgment...NOT with the understanding of, I'm right and you're wrong...but proclaiming the Gospel with acts of love, with acts of grace and mercy...it is NOT victory and defeat, it is lifting others up as we have been lifted by this Gospel...it is loving our neighbor NOT judging and destroying our neighbor...it is just as inviting to others as it has been to us in this community called the church.

In this community that is bound together by the faith we all share, we are not right in the face of who is wrong; we are a collection or a gathering of busted human sinners who are judged by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In that judgment through Jesus Christ we are set free from the bondage of sin and death. In that judgment we are sent to be the Good News that is the food for all souls who are just like us in this present order.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.