

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

We begin today with a reading from the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel is a mortal man called to stand before Israel and represent the holy voice of God. Our first lesson today closes with a direct message from the LORD during Israel's exile in Babylon. And we hear this today in that message from God:

As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:11)

There is a feeling of hopelessness within the Israelite exiles that Ezekiel is preaching to because they know that they are to blame. However, for the exiles to lament within this chapter, this way, marks a certain spiritual maturity in them. They have stopped self-deception and defensiveness and have acknowledged that they themselves are to blame for their sorry situation.¹

I mention this because I believe this passage along with our Gospel lesson calls us all to look at ourselves and our situations from an honest perspective before we begin to call others out by condemning them, accusing them, or shamming them. We are the ones who take pleasure in condemning the wicked...NOT God. We are all part of a great irony called the church. We are of God as the church. We are an assembly called, gathered, and centered in Christ. We are the very body of Jesus Christ and yet, we are, and we remain human. We are common ordinary folks who are very much a part of humanity that includes all the weaknesses and flaws of any human gathering. And if Jesus dies for us with all *our* wickedness, *our* flaws, *our* weaknesses, and our sins, then why would Jesus not die for others? However, there is an undercurrent of flawlessness or sinlessness that seeps into our faith or into our mindset about our faith that hears this Gospel lesson today as an invitation to step into a morally-authoritative position of judgment of others. Listen again to the opening line of the Gospel:

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

If another member of the church sins against me! As this method of maintaining the integrity of a Christian community is being set up around “me” and those who sin against “me,” keep in mind, the way in which the language that begins each step is written is calling for one who is skilled at maintaining the clear instructions of these procedures. And once we have set ourselves into that judgment seat dealing with this very defiant sinner, we are then told that:

if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

This is saying that *now*, after you and the “church” the ἐκκλησία have dealt with this offender you can excommunicate this person because we have judged them, and therefore, are able to cast them out as outsiders and sinners. This method, after all, is a clear and concise method of operation for maintaining the integrity of the congregation or the Christian community. One can see that this method is very simple and very concise and the church has been known to use this very method for maintaining conflict in a congregation. But my question is this, is Jesus giving the congregation

¹ The description of the Israelites is “borrowed” from Rev. Gregory P. Fryer, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY in his sermon preparation for Pentecost 13A, 9/3/2014.

a judgmental and very legalistic procedure to use like a hammer on others in our community and in our lives?

We all love Jesus and we all love the church, don't we, but we just can't stand Jesus' friends, you know...the ones Jesus calls us to serve...those out there who are very broken and desperate, who don't live like us, who are dirty and smell bad. Nor can we stand those who don't do as much as I do or do things a certain way in this assembly, in this gathering, so we have a procedure to take care of this sort of person or persons. However, listen again to what St. Paul reminds the church in Corinth in his first letter:

²⁶Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, (1 Corinthians 1:26-30a)

Before I start down this road of judgment to call someone out because of the damage or the hurt their sin has caused ME, as the verse says, I feel as though I need to ask myself first, who or how has MY SIN hurt others or damaged the community? Nonetheless, in the self-righteousness of this one verse, I can conclude that regardless of my sin, I can engage this procedure because Jesus has instructed me, as a disciple, to do so...that is if we look at this process the way we are looking at it this morning. But if we look at these few verses in the context of Chapter 18, this procedure takes on a different light and that judgmental light shines on ourselves the brightest.

Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel is another extended discourse from Jesus dealing with the life of the church. It is the fourth of five sermons from Jesus in this Gospel that is telling us how to humbly care for one another, protect the vulnerable, how to seek the lost and how to emphasize and personify endless mercy and forgiveness and *not* just call out the sins of others.

Jesus begins his preaching or his extended discourse because the disciples came seeking greatness in the kingdom of heaven. In response to their question, Jesus places a child among them and tells them that unless they become like children you will never enter the kingdom. What Jesus is revealing for them, with this child, is that in their culture at that time, children had no social standing, no legal rights or power. This alone throws a different light on our judgment of others. With this child Jesus is saying the Kingdom of God requires one to empty themselves of pride and social ambition, such as seeking to be first in the kingdom. Like a child we are to be humble, to fully trust, and to be totally reliant on God...to trust and rely on God's judgment.

Jesus then issues a severe warning to anyone who causes a vulnerable believer or one of the "little ones" as Jesus calls them, to stumble into sin, or refuse to welcome them. Jesus says it would be better to fasten a great millstone around our neck and drowned in the depth of the sea. But even children get mad and, in our anger, we still turn to that process to cast out that person who has sinned against ME. Jesus then tells us to look deeply into ourselves. If then we notice that certain body parts cause us to sin we are to cut it off and throw it away. Then Jesus keeps reminding us throughout this chapter, "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones;" (Matt 18:10).

He continues then with the parable of the lost sheep...Jesus tells of the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to search for the one that has wandered off. At the heart of this parable is Jesus telling a gathering or an assembly to deeply discern the prospect of dismissing or discarding the brother or sister, because we learn within this parable that God takes joy in actively seeking out and restoring the marginalized, the broken, and the wandering. We then hear Jesus respond to Peter about forgiveness with the parable of the unforgiving servant which tells us about limitless mercy. The chapter concludes with what some would call a warning, but I say it's an invitation to extend sincere forgiveness from the heart.

So, is this procedure before us today in the Gospel about judgment of others or is it about recognizing who we are as a community of believers who gather in the grace and mercy of our Lord? We want to be the greatest in the kingdom so we point out the faults of others to establish our place in the kingdom and we do so by comparing ourselves to others who are sinners just like ourselves. There is one very pensive quote from Jesus today that I have not mentioned, and it is the closing line of our lesson today:

²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (Matt 18:20)

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone...but we are not alone! As we sit with another in judgment, we sit with Jesus Christ himself in that meeting. And as we sit in that meeting with another to judge, we actually sit in the presence of Jesus Christ himself, and we sit as a sinner ourselves, judging others through the lens of our human standards forgetting that as human beings, we have been forgiven of our debt by God by the death of the one who sits with us. Our judgment that leads to excommunication is a contradiction that withholds forgiveness from others for their earthly offenses against ME.

Jesus earlier in this Gospel sat and ate with many tax collectors and sinners, the ones who are cast out, and because he did, we heard Jesus being accused of being a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of tax-collectors and sinners. And we heard earlier in this Gospel, Matthew quoting the prophet Isaiah saying he proclaims justice to the Gentiles, the outsiders.² And today, once again, he proclaims that same justice to us, that He does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked, and then once again, He joins us in this holy meal that assures us limitless mercy for all who eat of this bread and drink from this cup of salvation. In this ἐκκλησία, this community, this gathering, that is bound together by the faith we all share, we are not righteous in the face of someone's sins; 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. From that judgment, we are sent to be the Good News that is the food for all souls who are just like us...forgiven sinners who will not die, but live in God's glorious kingdom.

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

² The three passages from Matthew used in this sentence:

Matthew 9:10: And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.

Matthew 11:19 the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.'

Matthew 12:18 Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.