

Being Sinned Against

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 6 September 2020.

Psalm 149, Exodus 12:1-14, Matthew 18:15-20.

Three weeks ago, I dutifully watched every night of the Democratic National Convention. Two weeks ago, I dutifully watched every night of the Republican National Convention. Ever since then, I have pondered how deeply divided we are.

And in the mysterious timing of the lectionary, the first time I preach after both events, the gospel lesson is Matthew 18 – about listening and resolving conflict and coming to agreement because Jesus is present with us.

The version we read translated said, “If another member of the church sins against you.” But really, the Greek just said, “If your brother sins against you.” And later when we are told to take the matter to the church, the word for church can also be translated gathering or community. So these words of Jesus apply to both – how we treat one another in the church and in the wider community.

There is evidence the early church took this teaching to heart. The passing of the peace at Eucharist was serious business. If you were known to be in conflict with another member of the community, the two of you were expected to abstain from communion until you worked things out. Sharing the peace of Christ was an affirmation that things were good.

Not just good on the surface or good in a pretend sort of way. Jesus did not want people to seethe in anger or resentment or hurt. Jesus said we have an obligation to point out when someone sins against us so we can resolve the issue and agree in love.

If I am honest. I have not taken this command seriously most of my life. One small example comes to mind, and I am embarrassed to admit it in the face of the much larger challenges people face. But often when I meet someone for the first time and they find out I am priest, they make a comment about my appearance or say something to me they would never say to a male priest. This does not usually happen with church members, thankfully, but in the community it sometimes happens. I know no one intends any harm. They just do not know what to say. So, I usually make a joke or smile and act like it does not bother me because I was taught to be polite and I don't want to offend them.

But things like this do bother us. And it is not just what people say. The accumulated weight of being treated differently or denied opportunity can become very hard to bear. I know it happens to men as well as women. It happens more often to people of color and to LGBTQ folks and to people who deal with a physical or mental challenges, anyone who is different from the majority or vulnerable in some way.

In context, that seems to be what Jesus meant by being sinned against. Matthew 18 is a series of teachings about vulnerable people. The first verses are about welcoming a child. The next verses are about not putting a stumbling block in front of these little ones. The next verses are about going after one lost sheep. And then Jesus says to speak up when someone sins against you. The sins envisioned here are not the sins of powerful people butting heads because they each want their own way. And it is not feeling offended because someone said something to you that feels rude. It is a reference to the sins that harm those who are already in a vulnerable place.

So, what do we do, especially if we are the vulnerable person who has been sinned against and we are scared of being hurt more? Does Jesus expect folks who are being harmed to speak up? Do women have to be the ones speaking up about sexism? Do people of color need to be the ones speaking up about racism? Do people who are dealing with poverty need to speak up about the challenges they face?

Ideally, Jesus says yes. Jesus knows you might face some opposition, so there is a provision to gather allies. If you need more allies the whole church or the whole assembly is supposed to stand with you. But Jesus says, yes, if you have been harmed, own it.

And the reason Jesus asks this of us is not because he likes to ask us to do hard things. The reason is because owning the ways we have been hurt keeps others from being hurt and creates a better world for everyone. That is the spirit in which to listen to protests for racial justice around our country. It is the voice of thousands of people saying, “We have been sinned against. Listen to us so this will not happen to anyone ever again.”

In Matthew 18, Jesus spoke a different world into being. It is a world where we welcome the children and do no harm to the little ones and go after the lost sheep. It is a world where we agree that we want no harm to come to the vulnerable. Because that is the goal, then we want to be told when we have sinned against someone. We are grateful when someone has the courage to point that out. We are not offended, because the goal is to make sure it never happens again. That is the world Jesus wants for us.

But that is not the world we live in – not yet. It is not the world Jesus lived in, either. So, he seems to have given his followers an out. If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. It sounds like Jesus is saying, “Cast them out.” Unfriend them. Cancel them, if you will.

And, friends, if keeping the needs of vulnerable people as the priority in what you say and what you do and how you vote costs you some friends, if they choose to abandon you, or if you have to block some people from your social media so they will not harm others with what they say on your page, that may be the cross you have to bear.

But remember. What did Jesus do with Gentiles and tax collectors? He welcomed them. He ate with them. He healed the daughter of a Gentile woman. He kept the door open.

The invitation in this passage in this divided time is to stand firm on the value of protecting the vulnerable. That is bipartisan work. As you seek to protect the vulnerable, some may not like that and may choose to avoid you. But keep the door open for fellowship and healing. Seek agreement. Not for the sake of being nice but for the sake of working together to be sure no harm comes to the vulnerable.

And as we do that hard work of coming to agreement, Jesus promised to be with us. We often quote these words on a low-attendance Sunday. Yes, Jesus is with us when we pray. But even more, when we work in his name to prevent harm and come to agreement, Jesus is with us. Even now. Amen.

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