

Sermon for September 10, 2017 "Acting Out In Church"

Matthew 18:15-20

The story is told of an incident that took place when intercoms were first introduced into this one school. There was this one little boy that was disrupting his class. For the sake of the story we will give him the name Tommy. Tommy had disobeyed the teacher quite often and had been sent to the principal's office. The principal had a long talk with Tommy after which Tommy promised to do what the teacher said.

Well the very next day the principal decided to use the intercom to listen in on Tommy's class to see if he was keeping his promise. And guess what? Tommy was giving his teacher a hard time. The teacher would tell him to sit down and he would make an excuse. When he did sit down he would get up again in a few seconds. Finally the principal decided to remind Tommy of the promise he had made to do what the teacher said. So the principal used the intercom and said, "Tommy, do as your teacher tells you." At that Tommy sat down in his chair, broke out in a cold sweat, looked around and said "Yes God, I will."

The point of the story is that when the cat's away the mice will play. It's human nature to be good when you know you are being watched, but when there is no one watching that's when misbehavior breaks out.

Just as children sometimes act out in class, God's children sometimes act out in church. Now by acting out in church I am not speaking primarily about making noise and disrupting the worship service. Although with the church in Corinth that was the case. People were prophesying and speaking in tongues in such a way that it disrupted the service and created chaos. What I am talking about is people who are part of the church acting un-Christian. People in the church acting as if they were out of it hence "acting out, in church."

Jesus knew that this would be problem for the church, so he gave us some guidelines on how to deal with it. Jesus said to his disciples, "If your brother sins against you..."(Matthew 18:15) The NRSV says, "If another member of the church sins..." Jesus is talking here about those who are in the community of faith, the church, not those who are outside of it. These guidelines are for use among those who have confessed Christ, but are not following his teachings in an overt way.

What Jesus lays out can be characterized as policy guidelines for dealing with insubordination in church. It is a step by step process for dealing with sin within the community of faith. It is the Biblical basis for excommunication, churching, shunning and church trials. But that is not its purpose.

So let's take a look at this process that Jesus lays down. The first step is to go to the offender personally. This is a private meeting. The purpose is not to embarrass or humiliate the person. It is to help them to live right. They may not realize that what they are doing is wrong, or they may be ignoring that fact. This is a sensitive and loving way of calling them to their moral senses and saving them from the pain that the sin will cause if it continues.

The next step is, if the person does not turn from that sin, then you go with one or two friends. The purpose of the extra people is not to embarrass or humiliate the person. Perhaps it is to engage a little positive peer pressure. Maybe it is also to enable the offender to realize that the one who came to him before is not alone in their belief that their actions are sinful. Despite the other obvious advantages of this small group, the biggest advantage is that it provides witnesses. That way if the offender refuses to repent then there is more than one witness who can testify to it.

If it gets to this point then Jesus says that is when the whole church should get involved. At that point the whole church confronts the person. Kind of an ecclesiastical intervention event: "We love you and care for you and the way you are acting is hurting yourself and others." If then they refuse to turn from their sin, they are to be treated as an outsider. The point of all this is to give them opportunities to see the wrong they have done and to repent. The hope is that this will lead them to see the error of their ways and turn to God and rejoin the community.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. If he had this sermon would have been a lot shorter and maybe easier to write. After laying out a rather simple plan, Jesus lays some serious theology on us. He says, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."(Matthew 18:18) Then he follows it with "Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven."(Matthew 18:19)

This concerns me. If God gives a rubber stamp to what we decide, then we are all in big trouble. The church here on earth is notorious for making bad decisions. If we take these verses literally, then where had Galileo been between the time of his death and the recent proclamation by the church that they were mistaken in excommunicating him? And what about people who have been church-ed for square dancing or some other trivial offense.

Certainly God does not enforce the decisions that we humans make out of prejudice or ignorance. I believe that what these passages are talking about is our responsibility. Jesus said, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." If we fail to speak out and teach justice and righteousness, then our brothers and sisters in Christ may never come to an awareness of that unrighteousness and be able to repent of it. What we failed to bind on Earth will have long lasting consequences for them because the church did not correct them. However, if we are able to lead someone away from evil actions, then we have liberated them from that evil. Likewise if we go around excommunicating people from the church without sufficient cause, then we cut them off from the influence of Godly people and give them up to the world. So we have a responsibility to be gracious and not legalistic.

But Jesus puts all this into context in his final verse. He says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."(Matthew 18:20) We often refer to this passage as a way of affirming God presence in our gatherings no matter how humble. But here it has a quite different meaning. It is saying that God is always watching. If Jesus were to walk through that door, put on an Aldersgate name tag, and show up to all our Bible Studies and committee meetings, I think we would all act a little differently. Guess what? He does show up to all our services and Bible studies and meetings and mission events! We just don't see him in the flesh, but he is there.

We often get careless in our conduct when others are not watching. It is easy for even the most devote Christian to become frustrated with a backslider who refuses to repent. Sometimes we act rashly with those who are hurting themselves and others through their sinful and unjust conduct, but Jesus reminds us that God is in our midst.

Even if it is just you talking to a friend about his or her sinful unjust actions, God is there. And we can call on God to work on that person's heart to bring them to repentance. Like Tommy we need to be reminded that God is watching us in church. And we should be careful how we deal with those who act out. After all we are God's ambassadors in this world.