

Proper 18 (A) – September 4, 2011  
Saint Stephen's Church, Wimberley, TX  
Patrick Gahan  
Matthew 18:15-20  
*I gather you are awake?*

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“Are you awake?” was the question scrolled across the LED screen, and it was a very good question at 4:53 in the morning.

Just having received a steroid cocktail injection, our daughter's nights and days can get turned around. Thus she gathered that her insomniac father was awake, too. Even so, the vibrating rumble of my cell phone abruptly roused me before 5 AM on Tuesday. Terrified, I raced to the phone to read the query printed across the gray screen, “Are you awake?”

I was, but I wasn't, and I am not just talking about my droopy eyes and incessant yawns. No, when Catherine called just a few minutes later, she asked if I had spoken to a mutual friend of ours lately – a mutual friend who is hurting, a mutual friend who takes up a lot of time, a mutual friend who infuriates you, a mutual friend who never asks how you are doing, a mutual friend whom I avoid ... but a mutual friend who deserved a call.

Catherine fully got my attention at 4:53 AM with her simple question, and then she let out a long sigh and assured me that she was headed back to bed. On the other hand, once I hung up, the Lord's words started ringing in my ears, and I knew I needed to wake up, get over myself, and make the call. That's how the truth is threaded through us Christians: a sister or a brother confronts us about something or just simply reminds us, God confirms that person's words, and then we step out in faith to do what is right.

Reflecting on this truth, the philosopher writing in Ecclesiastes notes, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (**ECC 4:12**). [*Pull out three different colored cords as an illustration.*] You see, the first strand in the philosopher's hand stands for our sister, brother, or friend; the second strand is the Lord; and the third stand is each one of us. Entwined, these strands are hard to break – no matter how tough the assignment. It is interesting to note that the philosopher, who penned Ecclesiastes in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, was known as *Qohoelet*, which we have historically translated as the “preacher” or the “teacher.” However, the root word of his moniker translates as “gather”. So, in reality, *Qohoelet* was the one who taught the gathered Jewish community in his locale and taught them how their lives were miraculously enwrapped with God and one another, so that they remain firmly connected to divine truth.

We still have difficulty recognizing and acting on the truth without the love and wisdom of those gathered around us in the fellowship of believers – the Church. In fact, one of the main Greek words we have for the “Church” in the New Testament is *Koinonia*, which essentially means the “sharing community”. We share our lives with one another – even the hard parts. Jesus said it this way: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” **(MT 18:20)**. With this, Jesus unveils the miraculous math of God: One plus one equals three!

And Jesus assures us that our shared work will be very tough at times. Take the assignment he issues in today’s passage: “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point that out when the two of you are alone” **(MT 18:15a)**. That is anything but fun. Who wants to get in the face of another and tell that person they hurt you?

If we listen carefully to Jesus’ words; however, we see the real sense behind our assignment: “If the member listens to you, you have regained that one” **(MT 18:15b)**. Note that the emphasis is not to vilify the other, or to make the offender a pariah, but to heal the broken relationship, to reconcile and mend the communion between those two and perhaps others who have been caught up in the discord. Remember, Jesus promises to be in the middle of all this messy stuff.

Fr. Bill Scheel accentuated Jesus’ promise when he taught this scripture to all of us knuckleheaded men at Tuesday morning Men’s Bible Study. He asked us to thumb through our Bibles and read this passage in context – that is read what came before and after the passage. It was a very illuminating moment for the bunch of us. The illustration Jesus uses immediately before this passage is the *Parable of the Good Shepherd*. The Good Shepherd, remember, leaves his 99 secure sheep in search of the one that is lost **(MT 18:12-14)**. The lesson? No one is expendable, no one is a write off, and no one is a lost cause with God. Thus, we, like Jesus the Good Shepherd, never cease seeking those who are estranged from us.

The vignette that comes immediately after Jesus’ injunction to confront the sinner is Peter’s cleverly worded inquiry to Jesus: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? Seven times?” Jesus again replies using his new math, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven” **(MT 18:21-22)**. The lesson? God’s mercy never runs out and neither should yours or mine. Forgive as you have been forgiven; mend the breach between you and your friend as Christ continually mends the breach between you and God. In other words, our work is never done in this department. I like what Big John Thomas said in our Men’s Bible Study, “There always has to be a beginning to forgiveness, but not an end.” We must get started in the business of reconciliation, but we never meet our quota.

Well, in that case should we just gloss over sin, say nothing and act as though nothing has happened? By no means! Listen to what Saint Paul says about this: “Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast, so that you may be a new batch” (1 COR 5:6-7). Left unchecked, the destructive behavior will grow throughout our romances, our households, our fellowships, and our communities like a super virus or yeast on steroids.

In that case, what does Christian confrontation really look like? I have an example from one of the men in the parish. Let’s call him “Bubba.” It seems that some time ago a dear friend of his, a companion since first grade no less, borrowed a significant sum of money from Bubba. There was a long thread of friendship between the two, but try as he could through conventional, polite methods, Bubba could not get his friend to repay a cent of what he owed.

Finally, Bubba could wait no more. The relationship was strained to the breaking point. Bubba fretted about the debt night and day, and his friend went through all sorts of gymnastics to avoid him. Clearly, this long friendship had hit a dead-end. Seeing no other alternative, Bubba diligently sought out his friend. When he found him, Bubba got up in his friend’s face and said, “You owe me some money, a lot of money.” Bubba could see the whites of his friend’s eyes. “I’ve made a decision what I am going to do about it.” Now fear crept across his old pal’s face... “I am going to forgive every penny of it. I never want to speak of it again, and never expect me to say that you are indebted to me, because from this moment on – you are not.” Bubba took the path of the *Good Shepherd*, seeking his lost friend. Bubba used the math Jesus taught, forgiving his friend *seventy times seven*.

See, Bubba awoke to see that the real treasure was not the money but the friendship that had threaded through their lives for over 50 years. In that light, I challenge you as I challenge myself to examine and come clean about those broken family relationships, fractured friendships, and once dear associations we’ve let slip. Okay, so those people once “trespassed against us” – as the oft-mouthed line of the prayer goes (MT 6:12). Based on what Jesus had to say on the matter, that’s more our problem now – than it is theirs.

I must confess that Bubba’s story spilled over on top of me, and I made the call to my friend. It was the best conversation the two of us had shared in ten years. Honestly, I hung up after 30 minutes confident that I had been gathered up by Christ into the midst of a divinely choreographed miracle. And I am so grateful for a daughter, a sister, who awakened me.

