

Works Better Than Prunes Matthew 18:15-18  
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – 12th Sunday after  
Pentecost (September 4,) 2011

18:15 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. 18Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven..

Today's wee homily is the first in a **three part sermon series** dealing with THE **COMPLEXITIES OF RELATIONSHIPS**. **Next week's** sermon will address the complex task of **FORGIVENESS** and the **final sermon** in the series will deal with **perhaps the most important, and yet unrecognized, barrier to having good relationships**.

This morning's lesson from Jesus includes the **ONLY REFERENCE** in all the four Gospels to the word "**CHURCH.**" And it comes in about the middle of **chapter 18**, which **deals altogether with relationships**. Indeed, **not only are relationships at the heart of Chapter 18**, but **relationships are**, as we will discover in a few minutes, **at the heart of all that Jesus is about**.

Here, in today's short four verses, we deal with **HOW TO HANDLE CONFLICT** within the Church. **Some people** say that

this scripture is the basis for SHUNNING, a practice followed FORMALLY in Amish churches, and INFORMALLY in almost every other church and almost every group of three or more people.

I'm hopeful that in a few minutes from now, you will believe that it is NOT the intention of this scripture, at all, to authorize any form of shunning – because it indeed does have ETERNAL consequences. **“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”**

Whenever we take actions with that sort of eternal consequences, we need a great big dose of HUMILITY. And understand that **when some people SHUN and PUT DOWN and JUDGE**, they really are just trying to make themselves feel more accepted, more worthy. (Jesus talked about that, too.)

Let me see if I can illustrate, with your help.

Please listen to these instructions carefully. I am going to read a list of human situations. Please pay attention. **AT THE END OF THE LIST**, I invite you to **STAND**, as you are able, **if ANY of these situations describe YOU or a person in YOUR FAMILY**.

(How do I define “family”? Does it include 2nd cousins? I'll leave that up to you – however YOU decide to define FAMILY.)

⌘ Interracial marriage

⌘ Alcoholism

⌘ A member of the armed services, the military – whether drafted or enlisted

⌘ Homosexuality

⌘ Divorce

⌘ Abortion

⌘ Borrowed or lent money for the purchase of a house

If any of these descriptions fit you or a member of your family, please stand, as you are able.

Please look around the sanctuary at how many people are standing – and realize that BASED UPON THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE AND RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS OF A CERTAIN TIME IN OUR CHRISTIAN HISTORY, you would have been SHUNNED. And, if you personally had committed one of these actions, you would have been ex communicated, or been excluded from the fellowship of the Church.

That's how it was. We may disagree, or think such an interpretation of the Good News of Jesus, as done at that time in history, was silly, ignorant, or mean spirited. But it is what it is. ALL of those reasons would have put you in the ranks of

SINNER, at one point in our history, irrespective of your motive nor situation. **SINNER -- PERIOD.**

**“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”**

We need to be very careful.

The word CHURCH is incorporated into this process described by Jesus because WE, THE CHURCH, have a VERY IMPORTANT ROLE in life. We are meant to be examples, and even more.

⌘ But that does not mean that we are immune from conflict.

⌘ That does not mean that we are immune from people sinning against us.

⌘ Nor does it mean that you and I are immune from sinning against other people.

⌘ Nor does it mean that you and I are immune from being wrong in defining what is sinful.

But, because we are the Church, we are in the spotlight of unChristians using us as a yardstick for what the Good News of Jesus is about.

And, if we read the research that has been done about those unChristians (I particularly recommend the book by that name “unChristian”) we will see that we are not doing a very good job.

**Most of us** here today, sitting in the pews, **grew up in the Church**, in one way or another. As such, we really are quite ignorant about folks who have not. Most of us are **unable to grasp** the amount of **HATRED, at worst**, and **mere DISLIKE, in its milder forms**, that so many people have for the Church.

And this hatred/dislike exists because of **our failure to follow Jesus’ instructions** in this chapter. UnChristians regard us – YOU AND ME – as being: **mean spirited**, **judgmental**, **unloving**, and **hypocritical**.

That characterization comes about for primarily two reasons:

- (1) The diagnosis is correct for far too many church people.**
- (2) The Church people that are like this are the ones grabbing the spotlight of what Church is about – causing unChristians to believe we are all like them.**

But, we must start at the beginning. We must begin where Jesus begins.

**“IF ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE CHURCH HAS SINNED AGAINST YOU....”** That’s where Jesus begins.

He did **NOT** say: **“IF ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE CHURCH HAS SINNED ....”**

**Jesus did not EVER appoint the people in the Church to be the MORALITY POLICE. [ask congregation to repeat this]**  
Indeed, He did say over and over and over and over and over:  
**Judge not!**

**So, if another member of the Church sins AGAINST YOU, what are you supposed to do?**

- 1. Approach them one on one, to see if the correct result can be reached.** If that doesn't work, then
- 2. Take one or two others with you to approach the one who sinned against you, to see if the correct result can be reached.** If that doesn't work, then
- 3. Take the situation before the whole church, to see if the correct result can be reached.** If that doesn't work, then ...

Before I get to that, **WHAT IS THE LITMUS TEST** for reaching the correct result?

- ✦ That the **person repents?**
- ✦ That the person **says she or he is sorry?**
- ✦ That the persons **changes their opinion or conduct?**

Too often that is what has been read here. But **THREE TIMES, Jesus says** that the **CORRECT LITMUS TEST** is **“LISTENS TO.”**

- ⌘ **Listens to “him,”**
- ⌘ **Listens to “them,”** or
- ⌘ **Listens to “the church.”**

The **RELATIONSHIP IS MAINTAINED WHEN WE LISTEN TO EACH OTHER.** **We don't have to agree.**

We are THE BODY OF CHRIST. We are **more than just EXAMPLES** for people to watch. **Since Jesus ascended to heaven, WE – THE CHURCH constitute the BODY OF CHRIST.** **SEE 1 Corinthians 12:24-27 and Ephesians 4:11-16.**

And what's more: we have a job to do. **“God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, has given US the ministry of RECONCILIATION; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and ENTRUSTING THE MESSAGE OF RECONCILIATION TO US.”** (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

We are **not merely examples** for those outside the Church to watch. **OUR MISSION is to be agents of reconciliation.**

**UNITY does not require UNIFORMITY.**

**UNITY requires RECONCILIATION. We need to let go of what divides us and cling to what holds us together.**

Let me say that again – you can substitute in the words “**bound**” and “**loose**” from the scripture:

**UNITY does not require UNIFORMITY.**

**UNITY requires RECONCILIATION. We need to let go of what divides us and cling to what holds us together.**

**Oh, yes, one last little point.** Let me pick up one last thing, where I left off, in Jesus’ description of conflict transformation:

Take the situation before the whole church, to see if you can reach the correct result. *If that doesn’t work, then ...*

... then what? Shun them? Kick them out? No, Jesus said to treat them, “**as a Gentile and a tax collector.**”

- This is a reading from the **Gospel of Who? Matthew**, the tax collector.
- Can we remember **Zaccheus? Zaccheus the \_\_\_\_\_ [tax collector.]**
- Indeed, Jesus’ conduct throughout his earthly ministry caused people to deride Him as “**a friend of tax collectors and sinners.**” (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34)

No, if they won't LISTEN after going through all those stages, then that person becomes a SPECIAL PROJECT – like the *one sheep gone after, while the ninety-and nine are left behind* – the story told by Jesus IMMEDIATELY BEFORE today's lesson, also in this RELATIONSHIPS CHAPTER, Chapter 18.

**Q:** So what are you to do, if you've been sinned against by a member of the Church?

**A:** Go through the steps. Make LISTENING and RELATIONSHIP and RECONCILIATION your goals – NOT “being right.”

*That's what Jesus says.* That's how we bind up what's important, and how we loosen up the self-righteousness that binds us.

**Or, you might try prunes.**

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.