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Ezekiel 33:7-11
Matthew 18:15-20

ONLY SIN CAN KEEP US APART

I think we lost something when the New Revised Standard Version committee took the essence of this passage and gave it to us in very politically correct form, removing the sexist language of the King James and the revised version, but here's the way we used to read that passage in the Revised Standard version: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."

So often we read passages in the scriptures that have that male or female pronoun and that male or female noun that tells us, "OK, they're just talking to someone else; they're not talking to me." We've lost a sense of what brotherhood meant for the first century church. Brotherhood was that connection, that bond of God's family. In the same way, all humanity is connected to one another. When Jesus said, "If your brother sins ..." he meant if part of your family is hurting, is diseased, is hurting themselves; and they are hurting others because of that, that sin cannot be ignored. It only gets worse.

Jesus is talking about sin today. He's talking about confrontation. He's talking about repentance. Yes, and he's even talking about judgment. How can we understand the words from Ezekiel that God always judges to bring about repentance. God always punishes Israel only to say, "Don't you get it? I'm here. You don't have to be miserable."

I know that lots of people want to insist that this is a private business, this matter of faith—that there's only a personal commitment, that what we do is really just about us and what we've worked out with God.

When Jesus said when your brother sinned, he knew that was a corporate reality. You may have taken offense as I introduced this passage. He knew that where two or three are gathered, there would be sin. It's inevitable. You see, for the Jewish audience, they would never, ever have imagined themselves operating separate from the covenant family, the family of God. To be outside their kin—their faith community—would have been to be in isolation. It would have meant eternal punishment. The notion of personal business simply would never have occurred to them.

It's the way the Mennonites live today. If you watch, there's a consistency and a pattern in their lives that says to the whole world, "I am willing to give up some personal choices that we may have a common witness." It's the way the Amish seek to say as one people, "This world is not where our allegiance ultimately rests." Now, we know all the inconsistencies of trying to live that way; but clearly, what Jesus is asking us to understand today is that we have to confront the fact that our personal sin affects the whole body of Jesus Christ.

“If the member listens to you,” it says. We would say, “If the member gets it.” The light goes on and they understand, then the body has regained its sense of health. I love the way this passage develops. It’s almost as if Jesus is messing with us a little bit. How does it end? It’s a really quandary, isn’t it? Look at verse 17.

“And if they don’t get it, just treat them like gentiles and tax collectors.” Outcasts. But, Jesus, you spent most of your ministry reaching out to gentiles and tax collectors. Are you telling us when they don’t get it, we have to try that much harder? This is a real quandary. Is there no judgment? Is there no sense of right or wrong? It’s just what we feel? Or what works?

In Jesus’ day, when a tax collector or a gentile responded to the dramatic power of the gospel Jesus was preaching, he became a symbol—a symbol of what the church is—our mission. They became a symbol of our purpose. If you want to know what we are supposed to be doing, it’s reaching out to those to whom everyone else has said, “You’re beyond hope and all we want you to do is go away. You are too uncomfortable for us to embrace.”

But clearly, if there is no repentance on the part of the gentile and/or the tax collector, they do not remain a hero of faith. They remain a symbol of sin’s death-dealing consequences. Look at what’s all around this reading. Right before this, Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep—that you would leave the 99 and go find the 1. That mission is important. And right after this he tells the parable of the unforgiving servant—the non-repentant one who has been forgiven so much. That sounds like how I feel.

Cindy Jacobs says that sometimes we would like to take a little shower at Calvary, really convicting for those of us who baptize most of the time using a sprinkling. A little shower at Calvary rather than being deeply washed, cut and washed in the recesses of our heart from that sinful behavior that can only be washed by the action of Christ; the atoning sacrifice of one who bled and died for each of us. She said that we are unaware of the extent to which we damage ourselves with our sin until that difficult situation comes up. And suddenly—as if from nowhere—all the bitterness, all the hurt that sin has already caused us spills out onto others in our words. Our actions are very definitely expressions of what’s happening inside.

We experience something different when we surrender to the light of the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit shines into our souls, the unforgiveness in our lives becomes clear—the part that we have been afraid to confess even to God and most especially to ourselves. And we wonder, having harbored that unforgiveness, why our prayers feel so ineffectual—why they don’t seem to go above the ceiling. We’re wounded so deeply, even our prayers are tainted.

Jesus gives us a wonderful word of witness. In the last verse, he says very clearly, “The remedy is in my spirit being in your midst. And my spirit will be in your midst any time you gather in my name.” And though I cannot say that this is what the text says, this is

its meaning for me: My spirit will be in your midst when you make time and room for a small group of people who will hold you accountable, and will hold you up in prayer.

Our mission is to reach out to those who feel completely outside the church; and our mission is to reach out to one another because sometimes, even when you are here, it's hard to feel like you belong.

I've said that I'm going to let Gary Waitschies conclude the sermon. I'm actually going to let him give the coda to it. We're going to conclude in the last hymn. I don't think you've ever sung it, but the words are amazing. So as we continue now to worship God by surrendering our unforgiveness to God, by giving God that part of our lives that we would like to keep for ourselves, by sacrificing what we want in favor of obedience. As we worship God in that way, may we be made whole, and may our wounds be healed.

Amen.