

Sermon Title: A Roadmap to Reconciliation

Scripture Matthew 18:15-20

Seattle First Baptist Church

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It is quite an honor to preach for three congregations all at the same time. This message is being delivered at Mount Zion Baptist Church, Seattle First Baptist Church and Japanese Baptist Church. All three American Baptist churches are within 1-1/2 miles of one another in Seattle, WA. Since we geographically serve the same area, it makes sense that with our common Baptist beliefs and denominational connection, that we work together on some of our ministries.

This all began when Pastor Sam contacted the pastors of SFBC and me as a representative of Mount Zion, wondering if we could come together in some of our efforts. During that Zoom meeting, we wondered if during this season of on-line worship, might there be a way that we could do a new thing and share in one another's worship? Many of you know that I am part of the pastoral team of SFBC as well as an associate minister at MZ. I was already scheduled to preach at MZ, so today I'm preaching at all three churches. We pray there is a word from the Lord for all three congregations.

Our scripture is the lectionary text for the day, Matthew 18:15-20. It reads: "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. But 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. If 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. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Abba/ —toFather in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." The word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

There are a couple of things I like about this text. First, this text is concerned about mending broken relationships and healing hurt feelings. That is a good thing because there is a lot of pain and trauma going around these days. Secondly, I like that when 2 or 3 are gathered in Jesus' name, the Holy One promises to be in the midst of us. So I want to take a few minutes to unpack these two thoughts.

It is inevitable that people in relationships will have their feelings hurt. No one is perfect. Hurt happens! In this season of COVID-19, and families being together 24/7, there are tons of hurt feelings and more than a few broken relationships.

Some on-the-fence marriages before COVID-19 have not been able to withstand the intensity and stress of this season and have already ended in divorce. In this highly charged political season, family members who love each other are choosing not to talk to one another because political views and religious beliefs make civil conversation impossible.

And, even in the church there are difference of opinions- when to mask and not mask; when do we physically meet together as a congregation- now or wait until a vaccine; do black lives really matter, or is the constant killing of black men by law enforcement just a figment of our imagination.

Even as followers of Jesus, we have differences that result in hurt feelings, lack of trust, and at times churches even splits over differences and hurt feelings. Members of MZ know the pain of what that feels like. The Evergreen Association, of which all three churches participate, was born as a result of a fractured relationship within the ABCNW. Bridging the divide over the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the life of that ABC region was too much. So a split occurred.

The good news is that over 2000 years ago, this text recognized that in the community of faith, there will be differences of opinions and broken relationships. The gospel writer wanted that first generation of believers to come together, stay together, and move forward in Jesus' name. Starting anything new or re-imagining an established church or faith community is fraught with challenges. We have to be careful not to splinter over the small stuff. It really doesn't matter the color of the carpet, or who gets to be the president of the ministry this year, or who is the speaker for your ministry's annual day. That's small stuff.

As communities of faith we must keep moving forward to meet the needs of those around us. The world desperately needs Seattle First Baptist's hope for a just future. The world needs Mount Zion's vision for a beloved community and JBC's love that includes all creatures great and small. All our congregations must be voices of reason when the insanity of violence terrorizes our lives. And, we must model trust in our young adults and young families as they lead us now and into the future. We must trust our young people because our very survival is at stake. As we walk in the way of Jesus, we must show the world how to offer compassion and forgiveness to one another.

So, in this text Jesus offered a roadmap to reconciliation. If we are hurting because of what another has said or done, Jesus said go talk to that person. What good does it do to stew by yourself and the one who hurt you has no clue they did anything wrong. Jesus said, go talk to the person who hurt you. Do your best to resolve the issue privately. PRIVATELY! Now I know, when our feelings are hurt, one of our reactions is to hurt the other person as much as we were hurt. But an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, just leave us all blind and toothless. Amen somebody!

We must do our best to take the high road and solve our personal concerns privately. If that does not work, the text says to bring a couple of friends with you the next time, **before** airing your concerns publicly in front of the entire congregation. Then, if the offender still does not listen and change their ways, that person can be put out of the fellowship.

Now while I am grateful for this text in Matthew that offers a roadmap to reconciliation, I am painfully aware that this text has been misused to silence discordant voices in the church. This text has been used to put out people who do not act like us, look like us, or talk like us.

This passage has historically been misused to marginalize minority thought and emerging theologies. It has been used to disfellowship unwed mothers, refuse dedications of babies who are being raised by a single parent, and to exclude sexual minorities from church membership. The attempt to keep the faith pure (as of course, defined by the majority), has damaged the Church's credibility and led many to believe the church is obsolete and dying in the 21st century.

So, while it's tempting to be judgmental about new expressions of faith and social movements, we must be careful using **majority rules** as the litmus test for the truth, because the majority is not always right. The majority can be sinfully wrong! I was once told by a church leader that if I disagreed with the direction of the majority, I could find another church. I am so glad the God I serve isn't interested in majority rules. Liberation theologians, James Cone, and Gayraud Wilmore, said God is on the side of the marginalized and on the side of the oppressed.

If ever our focus is more on keeping people out, and limiting our welcome to only certain people, and keeping the faith pure, we have strayed from following the way of Jesus.

It is interesting to note that the text says if the offender does not listen and change their ways, they can be treated as one would treat a Gentile or a tax

collect. Well, in the scriptures Jesus welcomed the Gentiles, healed their loved ones, and encouraged the tax collectors to follow him. So, if we read the whole sacred text, we would be very careful about putting anyone out of the communion of faith.

Our lectionary text for today stops at verse 20 where Jesus said, where 2 or 3 are gathered, I am there. But I think the next two verses are critical when approaching someone about their hurtful words or sinful practice. Verses 21-22 read,

Then Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

So, my beloved ***if we are going to request reparations, repentance, and an apology from those who hurt us, scripture says we have to be willing to offer forgiveness.*** I know I’m meddling, and someone just clicked off and went to check their email and make a cup of tea. But hear me out! Yes, we want others to apologize for their wrongdoing, but we also have a role to play on this road to reconciliation. We have to forgive. Now this text doesn’t say be a door mat and keep putting yourself in the same situation to be hurt again.

It says stop counting the number of times you have been hurt. Stop counting the number of times you have offered forgiveness. Let me ask you, how many times has God forgiven us? Seven times, or seven times seven, times seven...

As I have said before, forgiveness is for us—those of us who have been hurt. We forgive so we can move on with our lives and not stay stuck letting our sores fester in the hurt and the pain. Forgiveness helps us get on with our healings. I know it is not easy, but it is the gospel.

Lastly, Jesus said, where 2 or 3 are gathered in his name, Jesus would be in the midst. I find comfort in that. Here again, it is not a big numbers thing. Big crowds get our attention. But God is not concerned about the overflow crowd on Sundays.

Lives are transformed when we talk one to another about the goodness of the Lord. Hearts are encouraged when 2 or 3 friends bring a meal to one who is homebound. Relationships are enriched as 2 or 3 make signs to march together against racial hatred and bigotry. Hope is renewed when 2 or 3 come together and pay a light bill for one who lost their job due to this medical pandemic.

Two or three congregations can also work together, in Jesus’ name and feed those who are housing insecure. Two or three congregations can provide

spiritual support for our children and offer comfort to those who mourn the loss of loved ones. We can worship together, pray together, sing hymn of thanksgivings and songs of praise.

Two or three congregations can transform Capital Hill, First Hill, Madison Park, and the new Yesler rebuild. We can choose as faith communities to look beyond our congregational weaknesses and beyond our personal bigotries and share our strengths with one another to the glory of God. We can work together to advance the kingdom of heaven.

And in so doing, we can show our neighbors that we are passionate about sharing God's love. We are passionate about healing broken relationships. And, we are passionate about offering forgiveness. Jesus gave us a roadmap for reconciliation and promised to be with us every step of the way. Now, let it begin in each of us. Amen