

Matthew 18: 15-20

If..., then what??

Our text from Matthew this morning begins with that little two letter word, IF. That word often carries so much meaning...at times it expresses our hopes about something to come. At other times it expresses our fears of something which might happen. It is a commonly used hinge word, if this happens, then we think something else will or should follow. So it seems we are looking at a possibility being proposed by this verse. In this case a course of action to be followed after an event. If this occurs, then that will or should happen. I find it interesting when various translations use different words in their framing of the verse they are translating. In this case, this variance happens right at the beginning of our passage, the first verse I read. I use the New Revised Standard translation when I read scripture from the pulpit. If you were following along in the Pew Bible as I read, you might have noticed it begins differently. The New Revised Standard version of **Matthew 18:15** says "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." Now during my studies of the passage this week there was something that struck me as unusual about this translation. This is from the gospel account by Matthew of Jesus' life and ministry. At this point where the passage occurs there was no church. And the conversation recorded is between Jesus and his disciples. One way to look at this is that church is an appropriate translation because these followers will form the church after Pentecost. It is often taken as Jesus preparing the disciples for future problems that may arise. But that doesn't seem to be a good fit for the context if you consider the entire chapter. The New International Version which is the one found in your pews begins this way: **Matthew 18:15** "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." There are some translations which read, "if your brother or sister sins against you", these translations are striving to be inclusive. And truly I think that we find that those who "sin against us" are likely to be of either or both genders. But what does the original Greek word tell us about who this person whose action has created a situation is likely to be? The Greek word used means brother, and is the same word that forms the basis of Philadelphia-city of brotherly love. The word can be understood as a literal blood kin description, or as referring to kindred in the general sense. Kindred used in the sense of family members, or clan, or tribe or community. This broad understanding of kinship occurs frequently in scripture. If taken that way, perhaps a good way to think about this verse's beginning is if someone who has a relationship with you does something to you. Looking at the next part of this sentence we come to what this person with whom you have a relationship has done. Both translations state they have sinned against you. Again, this statement is open to various meanings. We usually think of sin in terms of violating one of God's commandments. In that sense we are perhaps talking about stealing, or lying, or adultery. Yet actually no specific sin is named within this verse. And Mosaic Law provides explicit actions to be taken in the context of that type of transgression. Going back to the Greek word used in this postulated situation, we find that the meaning of this verb could not only be to sin, but could be a more open ended complaint: to do wrong to. If someone who you are in relationship with has done something to wrong you. Of course, in our current world that would seem like a situation more

likely to be prefaced with “when” rather than with “If”. We often feel wronged by other people—people who are friends, or family or sometimes groups in our culture. In the passage from Romans read this morning Paul speaks of the importance, actually the duty we have to love one another. In verse 10 he also states that love does no wrong to a neighbor. The word Paul uses here is not the one used in Matthew usually translated as sin, but another Greek word which means evil or harm. Paul’s initial list of things to avoid doing seems very much about obeying the commandments—in other words—not sinning. But after he exhorts the recipients of his letter that all these prohibitions can be summed up in the positive commandment of obedience to God that you “love your neighbor as yourself.” he then goes on to include other behaviors—adding avoiding such things as quarreling and jealousy. This first verse of Matthew then seems to giving a pathway of action for the mending of the results of an interaction or activity which has caused a disruption in the relationship between two people. If you feel that someone has wronged you, then you are to go to them—and to them alone—and then according to both translations I have mentioned you are to either show or point out the other’s fault. Notice, that in neither case is the problem between you and the other person now a sin, but a fault. Again the Greek offers other alternatives for this action—to enlighten or to convict are also possibilities for showing or pointing out. I have concentrated a great deal of time and effort on this first verse because I think it is a key item for the chapter as a whole. Chapter 18 actually begins with the disciples coming to Jesus with a question about who is greatest among them. Jesus’ response is to tell them that they must change and become humble in order to be great in heaven using the example of a little child. The disciples again have their minds on earthly things, like status. And there is the underlying seed of ambition and jealousy among them. In the passages between this question by the disciples and our text for this morning, Jesus also addresses those who put stumbling blocks in the way of others. We also have the parable about the shepherd who rejoices over finding the lost sheep. This expresses how much God wants to draw us into God’s own rich embrace of forgiveness and mercy. The shepherd goes out in order to find the one who has gone astray. It is into this context that we get this conditional “if another sins against you, then go.” Jesus is offering a remedy for repairing relationships; a way to effect reconciliation about differences. This entire chapter is really about forgiveness. Go to the one who hurt you and tell them about it. How often could we reconcile differences with others if we just did that first step? If we have been hurt by someone’s actions, then Jesus councils us that we were to go and tell them about it. Don’t tell others first then perhaps you won’t ever need to tell anyone else. If we don’t keep in mind the centrality of forgiveness in this chapter, we can easily make this passage simply a procedure for dealing with others whom we find troublesome. How often do we proceed to the later steps of telling one or two or even whole groups of others about our wrong yet never tell the one who we feel wronged us? How often if we took only that first step would we find that the other person felt hurt or wronged by some action or careless word we had spoken? The reason that forgiveness is so important in this chapter and in our lives is that we often mess up. Whether out of insecurity, bad training, or habit we often put our wants, needs, and desires ahead of others. And in doing so, we hurt them. We all do this, often multiple times in a week—or sometimes several times in a bad day. So we need forgiveness, not only from God, but from and toward each other. As I mentioned earlier, it would be easy for us to take this passage as a simple three step process for dealing with those whom we find difficult. Step one

take the offender aside; confront him/her showing him/her the error of his/her ways. Step two, recruit some friends to form a group to confront said offender. Step three, shun and/or banish unrepentant offender. Repeat as necessary. This interpretation is wide open to abuse as well meaning people decide to have these confrontations with someone with whom they disagree. But if read in the light of the larger context of forgiveness found in the chapter as a whole then everything about the goal of this process changes. The goal is no longer to change someone else's behavior or demonstrate how he or she is wrong, or even to invite them to repentance. Rather the goal is to restore a damaged relationship by speaking truthfully about the breach or hurt you are experiencing, taking responsibility for your feelings and your actions and inviting the other person to do the same. In doing this, you invite dialogue and conversation that you might find a way forward together. Near the end of the passage, as Jesus finishes with the last step which we have often taken as permission to shun—what he actually says is “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Now think about how Jesus acted toward the Gentile and tax collector. He included them among those to whom he ministered. This generous inclusion of those who we feel have wronged us is not something that comes naturally to us. Perhaps that is why this discussion with the disciples comes with the promise which we so depend upon: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” In this matter of going to one with whom our relationship is strained or damaged, doing it prayerfully is important. Because when we go in that manner, Jesus promises to be in the conversation. Jesus also tells his disciples that when they go to God they are to remember any grievances they have with another and mend those things first. In the prayer which we call the Lord's Prayer we are reminded to forgive as we are forgiven. Considering all this things, it seems that this verse in Matthew 18 is a call for us to live out the second great commandment for the goal is to “regain that one”. The last verse of the passage then provides how we can do it, the enabling presence of Christ with us.