

Matthew 18 Romans 13 Ringtones

Both of the passages read from Scripture this morning, different as their focus may at first seem to be, are really about the same fundamental issue that we have—relationships and what are the things we base our relationships upon. Yesterday I began another course through the seminary. This one is entitled the Theology of Luke-Acts. In the introduction, Dr. Brisson talked about the interlocking loops or themes found in this two volume gospel. What struck me about this as he talked is something which relates to this morning's readings...That something was that the underlying theme of all Scripture is about the interlocking relationships we have with God and one another—the connections between God who created and the creature created; the connections-relationships which God desires to exist among those created creatures—connections and relationships with each other and finally what all of these connections-relationships are to be founded upon -- God's love for all. When looking at the Matthew passage that connectivity and its basis are not immediately apparent. The first verse sounds like something you would as a good Presbyterian find in the book of Order--except for a slight alterations of when instead of if as the premise for the interaction described. Matthew 18: 15-20 begins "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." This is step one, and is followed by three more progressive steps of actions to be taken, finally resulting in the expulsion of the unrepentant offender. There are a couple of levels through which this may be viewed depending upon what "sin" has occurred. And this passage gives us absolutely no clue about the nature of this "sin". To some extent our thoughts go to a particular understanding of sin. When we think of sin, we almost always think of something that is offensive—offensive to God and/or something that is against religious or moral law—a transgression; in that context our first reference is to a violation of those commandments given to the people who came out of Egypt as the Lord worked to form them into people of the covenant. The Greek lexicon gives us another different definition first. It is a literal one based on the components of this compound word. The word means to miss the mark.¹ Of course, those laws given by Moses sum up many of the ways we miss the mark in the way we live—those Ten Commandments we most often refer to were given to show how we should live together. God drew them out into the wilderness and taught them how to live together with multiple laws covering almost every imaginable situation. And throughout most of our lives we manage to adhere to many of them—but there are a few that cause us trouble—the ones about coveting or telling falsehoods—we actually usually today don't refer to them as "sin". The second meaning given to the Greek word used here is to be in error. Again, in the context of "sin" it is easy to understand sin as being in error by not adhering to those rules. But perhaps that we are not clearly seeing the situation because the text actually doesn't say "if another member of the church sins against you" but begins "if your brother sins against you". That changes the dynamic—it makes the sin as something that has happened between you and someone close to you—someone you love. Now, human nature being what it

¹ [Fri] **ἁμαρτάνω** fut. ἁμαρτήσω; 1aor. ἡμάρτησα; 2aor. ἤμαρτον; pf. ἡμάρτηκα; literally *miss the mark, be in error*; figuratively, of offending against God, man, religious or moral law *sin, do wrong, transgress*, opposite ἀγαθοποιέω (*do what is right*)

is, those Ten Commandment Laws are sometimes broken within families, but more often there are other things among people who are close to one another that could be described as actions or words that “miss the mark” of relationship. The instruction here is to go and “point out the fault” according to our translation. The phrase “point out the fault” is derived from a single word—a verb meaning to “bring to light, expose, or set forth”.² There is no object of the verb in the Greek. So strictly speaking, one whose relationship with another has been damaged by that other’s actions is to go to them in private and bring to light, expose or set forth whatever has caused the issue...and the cause is never defined in this text. All that proceeds from this first step is a continuation of the effort to restore the relationship—make whole the community. A question for us which arises from this text is this: are we being given a set of rules to live by within community---or is this passage privileging relationships over just about everything else in our lives as Christians. Is it a neat little formula for maintaining order within the Christian community that goes like this—someone offends you confront them, if that doesn’t work, you try intervention, and if that doesn’t work you cut them off from the community. Somehow that doesn’t resonate with the rest of the context where this passage is found. Although we haven’t read them yet this year in verse 10-14 of this chapter we have the parable of the one lost sheep from the flock of one hundred; in verses 21-22 Jesus answers Peter’s question about the number of times forgiveness is to be offered as “not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” So what is the message which Matthew is trying to get across to us? What if the point is not about setting up rules of engagement for dispute within the community but is rather about trying to build authentic Christian community? What if the point is less about having a code of conduct to follow and more about regaining a brother or sister? What if this is a solution offered by someone who knows that relationships take work to maintain and that community is actually harder to forge and maintain than we might hope or imagine. Because going to some with a grievance with your concern or own grievance is a lot harder than talking about it to someone else. Bringing other to listen closely to both sides to what is said is a lot harder and takes more courage than simply posting something on Facebook. And working out disputes as a community together rather than simply making and dispensing judgment can be really, really hard. What if Matthew’s major concern isn’t actually settling disputes but creating an environment where Christ’s presence continues to bring forgiveness, healing and joy. This more relational approach to what we are being told opens up a couple of different ways to look at what follows in the passage. Suddenly, this loosing and binding may not represent promises of unlimited power but instead invite extreme caution before setting anything in stone as the way we look at one another on earth may have cosmic consequences. Seeking agreement with others in the community is not a formula to force God’s hand to grant us what we want but is instead the promise that when Christians come together to discuss, listen for, and discern God’s will, nothing is out of our reach. And the assurance of Jesus’

² ἐλέγχω—1. *bring to light, expose, set forth* J 3:20; Eph 5:11, 13; Tit 2:15.—2. *convict, convince, point out* J 8:46; Js 2:9; Tit 1:9, 13; Jd 15.—3. *reprove, correct* Mt 18:15; Lk 3:19; 1 Ti 5:20; *discipline, punish* Hb 12:5; Rv 3:19. [pg 62]

presence in this is a reminder that what we say and do together is always said and done in the presence of our Lord. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Surely this is a promise that we should take comfort in. But it may also serve to remind us that Christ is always there and we can only truly be in community—in loving relationships—when Christ is present with us and we seek to live according to God’s design for community. Looking at the message from Matthew as guidance for living together as a community brought together in the presence of Christ, then what Paul is telling the believers gathering in Rome is more easily seen as based on the same message. “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet; and **ANY OTHER** commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” This summation appears in Exodus, Jesus gives this answer as the corollary to the question what is the greatest commandment, Paul tells those to whom he writes that this is what all relationships with God and others is founded on. A definition of sin as missing the mark is thus failing to fulfill God’s love: love does no wrong to a neighbor. What Paul says next is what got me thinking about ringtones. Paul follows his statement about fulfilling the law with an urgent call to wake from sleep. Evidently some of those who have become believers have not changed their ways. He says, “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Paul is adamant that the believers in Rome must wake from their sleep—the sleep of a way of life that does not fulfill the law which states no wrong be done to a neighbor. Paul defines sleep as the works of darkness, habits and relationships fueled by selfishness, self-indulgence, and the absence of discipline—sin. Most of us now have “smart phones”—phones with all sorts of “apps” built in even if you don’t download special ones. One of these built in features is a number of ringtones which can be used to identify who is calling before you answer—or to set a timer for an alarm to wake you or remind you of an appointment. Some of these ringtones are low-key, gentle and soft. Some are loud, brassy, strident sounds which you can’t ignore. Paul wants to sound one of these latter alarms—he wants believers to wake up. Paul felt the time between the resurrection and Christ’s return would be short—but centuries have passed and this advent still has not occurred. It is now easy for us to lose our sense of urgency about this call to spread the news of the world as God desires it to be...a place where one does no wrong to a neighbor because all are loved and valued. We need this call to urgency as much or perhaps more than those early believers. There is still the urgent truth that our lives are short and we have a limited time to serve Christ in the world. Paul declares there is one claim of service which trumps all others—that is the claim of love. Allowing love to govern all our relationships fulfills all the commandments. When Paul calls on us to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”, the call is to put on Christ’s love for us so that we may love others. The cross and resurrection of Jesus are to be the light that illuminates each day to guide our actions. Perhaps we need an internal “app” which sounds an alarm; which gives us a ringtone whenever we stray from that guidance—a ringtone which reminds us of whose we are—perhaps we need the cross as our ringtone. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

