

14th Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

At one level today's Gospel passage seems straightforward – a three-step process set out by Jesus for maintaining order and discipline in the community of faith, and the inexorable exclusion of those who refuse its authority. However, as William Barclay notes*, the text reads much more like the regulations of an ecclesiastical committee than something Jesus might have actually said! Indeed many things about the tone and content make it feel less like directly reported speech and more like a later adaptation of something Jesus said to suit a particular agenda.

This is not surprising given the background of exterior persecution and interior conflict against which Matthew's gospel was written; neither does this rob the passage of its value as a set of guidelines for both a process and the spirit in which it should be approached. However to read it only through a lens of church order, and particularly if – as happens with the lectionary selection – divorced from the preceding verses, runs the risk of losing sight of something which seems a key element of Jesus' teaching here – namely the need to pay attention to our own contributions to and responsibilities for creating or repairing conflict and damage within our networks of community.

Preparation

We encountered the term 'stumbling block' last week with reference to Peter. It's an idea which occurs 19 times in Matthew – although the words *skandalon* (*n*) and *skandalizo* (*v*) are actually translated in a variety of ways.

Consider the terms '**stumbling block**' and '**stepping stone**' and then

either

make your own definition of each in a word form e.g an acrostic, a word cloud, a haiku or other poetic form

or

make a non-word based representation of what each term means to you using whatever materials or methods you find helpful

Text

Matthew 18:15–20

“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 Father in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Comment

This particular Matthean pericope – sometimes headed ‘reproving another who sins’ – sits at a hinge point in Chapter 18. The following section – which we’ll look at next week – deals with forgiveness; the one preceding it, although at first glance its elements may seem to be separate, is arguably a sequence about sin and its seriousness – particularly as it draws others into its vortex. And the starting point – as it will also be in the passage that we read next week – is with ourselves, not with those who ‘sin against us’: is our basic attitude orientated towards community or competition (the question of who was the greatest was one to which the disciples returned repeatedly)? Do our actions help or harm others? What should we do to resist damaging others?

The seriousness of the matter is underlined in a variety of ways: through Jesus’ repeated use of the word *skandalon* (something which causes stumbling) and its cognate verb *skandalizo*; by the hyperbole of his direction (with its echoes of Matthew 5:29) to ‘cut off’ ‘tear out’ and ‘throw away’ that which might cause ourselves or others to trip; likewise by that of using *onikos mylos* (a millstone of a such a size that it had to be turned by an ass) to describe the punishment – particularly for those who lead others into sin; and finally by the urgency conveyed by the parable to recover those who were so led astray (Matthew’s placing and rendition of the parable give it a rather different feel to its Lucan counterpart).

Thus when we come to today’s passage as it deals with conflicts within a community, we are doing so having been forcefully reminded of our own propensities to contribute to these. Indeed Matthew has already in an earlier

passage (5: 23–24) given us something which might be seen as the obverse face of this situation:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Taking this starting point can help us see this passage outside of the lens of simply a (somewhat adversarial) church discipline and boundary setting scenario. Conflicts in any community – be it church, family, workplace etc. – are very rarely simply the fault of one person or one action. When we are part of a connective network, our actions have consequences both for ourselves and others; moreover our human tendency, particularly if we feel we have been wronged, can all too easily be towards adopting words or actions which drive us into progressive cycles of misunderstanding and hurt. However if we are willing to go peaceably, gently (c.f. Galatians 6:1), and honestly to someone to admit to our own errors or to initiate a conversation on how their actions or words have adversely affected us, then this can be an important first step in breaking such cycles rather than perpetuating them.

Taking a less ecclesial lens for the passage helps us to see other elements of it in a different light too – for example the importance not only of direct communication but the possibility that others in the community network can help facilitate or report on this in non-partisan or non-judgemental ways. It might also give us another perspective on the ‘binding’ and ‘loosing’ comments in verse 19 and on whether it is actually *ourselves* we are endangering or helping – something we will return to next week.

So then, regardless of whether we are the offended or the offender, Matthew’s Jesus makes it clear that the onus is on us to assume agency in trying to effect reconciliation and restoration when relationships are disrupted. Indeed the tenor of this whole chapter challenges us to begin with ourselves – an honest appraisal of our own understandings and motives; an appreciation of the seriousness of contributing to cycles of relational disruption and of the consequences which can ensue; and a willingness to address and curtail or change any of our own ways of thinking/perceiving/speaking/acting which contribute to such disruptions. These are all necessary parts of turning stumbling blocks into the stepping stones which will help us, and our community, journey towards forgiveness and the repair of what is fractured.

Response

Think of a situation in which you are (or have been) involved where there has been a breakdown of communication, understanding, or trust. Are you able to identify any aspects of your own thought patterns, words, or actions, which may have contributed to this, or to have drawn other people into the cycle in potentially damaging ways? If so, can you see any steps you could take to deal with these stumbling blocks? Is this an area where someone else within the community (or a professional practitioner outside of it) could help you?

If you are not involved in such a scenario you might want to use your preparatory reflective work to think in a more general way about how you tend to respond in a situation in which you feel you have been wronged. Are there patterns which you can identify? Are there ways in which you could celebrate and strengthen the helpful ones or work at changing those which are less healthy?

Prayer

Jesus,
when we feel your words are too harsh
help us to look at ourselves
and our motives more honestly,
and to see the consequences
of our behaviours more clearly;

when we feel your demands are too severe
help us to understand our connectedness more deeply,
our capacity to disrupt and distort it more acutely,
and so to shape our words and actions more carefully;

when we are the offender,
when we are the offended against,
help us to find the grace and the courage
to reach out
and reshape the stumbling blocks
into stepping stones
on the path towards repairing
what is fractured.
Amen

Further Reading

* 'The Daily Study Bible' (revised Edition): The Gospel of Matthew Volume 2

by William Barclay

The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh