Matthew 18:15-18

Sometimes I wonder if we are just not too lax. I hear that a church member has been rude to a visitor, or picked up a telephone and poured anger and bitterness, even hatred into another's ear, wounding their heart. Forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness. It used to be obedience, obedience, obedience. But now lawlessness reigns throughout the world, even in the church.

Listen to the people outside the church. They are disappointed in us. They say we are no different than anyone else. Hypocrites they say. We say, We are not the gathering of the righteous, but the forgiven. We begin our worship with the confession of sins, admitting our defeat from the very start. Accepting our sin, even getting pretty comfortable with it. Saying I'm a sinner with nary a tear in our eye.

Hear what God intends for the church: Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

People being cleansed, being sanctified through hearing God's word and being renewed, made new, by that word. That is the church. But I say, 'I'm a sinner but so is everyone else, so don't you hassle me about it. My life is none of your business. Take me as I am or not at all. I know that is not what God intends. He has placed me not in some cave, alone, but here in the body of Christ, the church. Through you God is making me a finger in this body of Christ, you are an arm. If I am infected with sin, the whole body is in pain, the whole body is in danger. My grandmother always said, When your feet hurt, you hurt all over. But I think that is true as well for the hand and the ear and the eye. As Paul says, If one member suffers, all suffer together, if one member is honored all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.

Because we are one body, because I can't have health unless you are healthy, Christ has given to us these commands:
If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and your
him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained a brother. But if he does
not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be con-
the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to
them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church,
let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever
you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth,
shall be loosed in heaven.

Hear that first step: If your brother sins against you, go and tell him
his fault between you and him alone. That takes a lot of courage. No, it
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* does not take courage to dial the phone and swear at and insult another
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* person, to yell how rotten they have been. But it takes courage and faith
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* and love to go to another who has truly hurt you and to speak, with tears in
your heart of that hurt. Not to accuse and point a finger and condemn, that
only piles sin upon sin, but to simply open yourself up and let another see
how they have driven a knife into you, that takes more courage than any of us
have, but not more than God can supply. Whether that offense against you has
been great or small, this is the first step. Not harboring and nurturing
and feeding the hurt with bitterness and desire for revenge, but
go to the other that you might let it go, be freed of that hurt that
will enslave you.

And then, if that fails, the second step: Take others along. The
people in Alcoholic Anonymous have this step down to a science. They
call it an intervention. The people who are most important to the alcoholic
are gathered to be trained to together talk to the alcoholic. They are trained
to one after another speak to loved one saying, "Dad, you missed my graduation,
I felt so alone with all the other kids parents there, If you had not been
drinking Dad, that would never have happened." And then another and another,
each speaking from the heart, not to condemn but to save, to bring him back.

So Jesus tells us to go, tow or
three to bring him back.
Then, if that fails, before the whole church. Before the rest of the body that there might be healing, not amputation. But if he refuses to listen even to the church, then let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Now what does that mean? Clearly they are to be cut off from the church. But when we realize that the writer of these words, Matthew, was a tax collector, when we realize that when Matthew wrote down these words, the church to whom the gospel was given was a Gentile church, then we begin to hear what Jesus is saying. As one pastor put it, this means that they go to the very top of the evangelism list. They are the sick ones, in need of a physician, Jesus.

This is reinforced when we look at the parable immediately preceding this section, the parable of the ninety-nine sheep and the one. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine, and seeks the lost one. Jesus concluded that parable not by saying, So it is the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

And immediately following our gospel for today Jesus says, forgive your brother seventy times seven.

You see, there are dangers for the church. We are always tempted to believe that God wants us to be the gathering of the pure, that our responsibility is to cut off the sinner, to pluck out the eye that offends, to execute righteous judgement. Or we fall off the other side and say, Nothing matters, let us continue in sin that grace may abound. But Christ has brought us together, whole, not because we are the saved, but to heal. You and I are here not because we are the miracles in this world, but that he might work a miracle in us, making a people who are common and profane into the cleansed ones, holy and without blemish.

How slow I am to learn this, how slow have all of us been. But beginning today, let us listen to our Lord. If your brother sins against you, go to him alone, not as his judge or his superior, not in pride, but in humility.

What is at stake? I think of Dorwin. Forty-five years old, with diabetes, there could have been complications. Dorwin's body would not heal, his fingers and
toes become infected, then were possessed by gangrene. The doctor had no choice but to cut, joint by joint, finger by finger toe by toe. Day after day I would visit him in that hospital across the street from our church. His pain, and his grief over losing his own body were overwhelming. Later, his legs were short stumps, only parts of a few fingers were left.

We in the church do well to feel the kind of sorrow Dorwin felt when members of the body are cut off. But in the body of Christ, amputation is not irreversible. The forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ can restore every diseased part, every plucked out eye.

You are the body of Christ. Not one part of this body is expendable. Go to those who have sinned against you, let God do what you cannot, restore and heal and reconcile. Let God make you and every member of this body, whole.